PENNY NICHOLS

AND THE KNOB HILL MYSTERY

JOAN CLARK

Penny Nichols and the Knob Hill Mystery

Penny Nichols, blonde daughter-of-a-detective, is back again. Penny's father thought he was going away for a rest, but he made one mistake. He took Penny with him, and it was a very small amount of rest he got after Penny discovered the man with two names, and the clue of the toy lantern. The Knob Hill Mystery is one of the most absorbing cases in which Penny and her father have figured. You won't be able to stop reading until you reach the last page.

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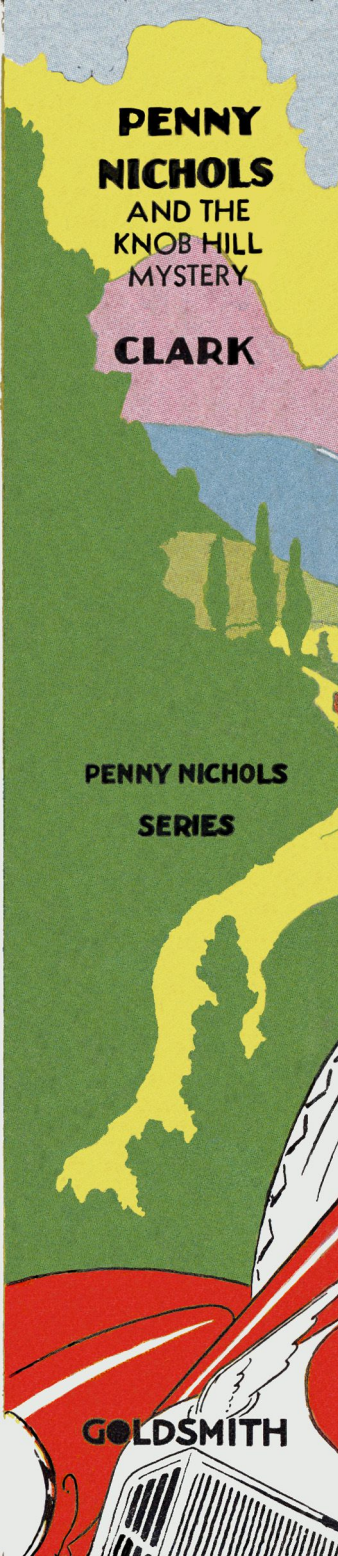

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AND THE

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PENNY NICHOLS AND THE KNOB HILL MYSTERY

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Penny Nichols and the Knob Hill Mystery

By

JOAN CLARK

★

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CONTENTS

CHAPTER		PAGE
I.	A Cottage at Knob Hill	15
II.	Helping a Stranger	28
III.	A Queer Old Man	41
IV.	Inside Information	53
V.	A Night Visitor	66
VI.	The Attic Door	77
VII.	Penny's Discovery	86
VIII.	The Toy Lantern Clue	100
IX.	Herman Crocker's Visit	112
X.	Searching the Loft	124
XI.	Aid from Michael	134
XII.	The Matron's Story	147
XIII.	A Bolt of Cloth	161
XIV.	A Conversation Overheard	172
XV.	The Missing Letters	182
XVI.	A Lost Handkerchief	194
XVII.	A New Clue	203
XVIII.	Inside the Gabled House	213
XIX.	Michael's Admission	223
XX.	Alias Jay Kline	236

PENNY NICHOLS AND THE KNOB HILL MYSTERY

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Penny Nichols and the Knob Hill Mystery

CHAPTER I

A Cottage at Knob Hill

PENNY NICHOLS, hair flying in the wind, came running up the steps of the Altman porch. She did not need to ring the bell, for just at that moment Susan, her dark-haired chum, appeared in the open doorway.

"Why, hello, Penny," greeted the Altman girl. "You're all out of breath."

"I ran most of the way from home," replied Penny.

"I was hoping you'd drop in today. Come on into the house."

"No, I can't, Susan," said Penny hurriedly. "I just ran over to say good-by."

"Good-by?" echoed Susan blankly. "You're not going away, Penny?"

"Yes, Dad took a sudden notion he wanted to spend a quiet vacation at a place called Knob Hill. We're motoring down there this afternoon."

"Well, I like that!" exclaimed Susan. "You didn't say a thing about it when we were playing tennis yesterday."

"How could I when I didn't know anything about it myself until an hour ago? That's the way Dad does things, Susan."

"I suppose you're going off on another one of those exciting mystery cases," Susan said enviously.

"I only wish we were," sighed Penny. "This vacation won't be a bit exciting. Dad just wants a complete rest at a quiet place. He says he'll not even think about work while we're gone."

"What sort of place is Knob Hill?"

"From all I can learn it's just a dead spot on the map," Penny declared. "And we've rented a cottage sight unseen."

"Oh, it may not be half bad," said Susan encouragingly. "You'll probably be able to do a lot of interesting things—swim, hike or ride."

"Not at Knob Hill," replied Penny, shaking her

head. "It isn't a summer resort place at all. There will be absolutely nothing to do except eat, sleep, and grow fat."

Susan laughed as she glanced at her chum's slender figure. Penny was too active and athletic ever to be plump. She had sparkling blue eyes, golden hair, and a natural smile. It was very easy for her to make friends.

"I haven't finished my packing yet," said Penny. "I'll have to get back home or I'll keep Dad waiting."

"I'm terribly sorry to see you go," Susan told her. "Don't forget to send me a postcard now and then."

Penny promised that she would write often, and then, aware that time was slipping away, said a hurried farewell. Reaching her own home, a large white house on Hilburn Street, she found her father washing the car in the back yard.

Christopher Nichols was a tall, slim man with graying hair. For many years he had been in charge of the Nichols Detective Agency and was well known not only in Belton City but throughout the

state. Many persons believed that Penny had inherited her father's sleuthing ability, for even at the age of fifteen she had shown remarkable talent in solving mystery cases.

As Penny paused for a moment to chat with her father before going into the house, she noticed the tired lines of his face.

"Dad really needs a long rest," she thought. "I ought to be glad we're both running off to a quiet place like Knob Hill."

"Hello, Penny," Mr. Nichols greeted his daughter. "I'll have this cleaning job done in another ten minutes. Then I'm ready to start whenever you are."

"You seem anxious to get away from Belton City," Penny smiled. "You're not trying to escape from any creditors?"

"Nothing like that," laughed Mr. Nichols. "I'm just sick and tired of the Nichols Detective Agency. For two weeks I intend to forget everything remotely connected with investigation work. Why, if a thief broke into the house tonight and stole our diamonds, I'd not interest myself in the case!"

"That's what you say now," chuckled Penny. "Anyway, we haven't any diamonds."

"Inspector Harris tried to tempt me with a case only today," the detective went on, his face becoming serious again. "I told him I couldn't take it."

"You've earned the right to your vacation," Penny declared.

Mr. Nichols glanced quickly at his daughter.

"You're not very anxious to go to Knob Hill, are you, Penny?" he asked.

"Why—what makes you think that?" Penny stammered. The question had caught her off guard.

"I pride myself that I've learned a few simple things during my twenty years as a detective. Faces aren't hard to read—especially yours."

"Dear me," said Penny, "I didn't suppose I was an open book. Just what does my face tell you?"

"That you're bored at the thought of going to a dull place such as Knob Hill. It's selfish of me to drag you along——"

"No, it isn't, Dad!" Penny broke in. "You've needed this rest for years and I'd not think of letting you go off by yourself. Why, for all your wonderful

detective ability, you can never find your own slippers!"

"That's so," Mr. Nichols chuckled. "Well, I hope the two weeks won't turn out to be too monotonous for you."

Penny left her father to finish cleaning the car and ran into the house. Mrs. Gallup, the kindly housekeeper who had looked after the girl since the death of her mother, was preparing luncheon in the kitchen.

"I've laid out all your things on the bed," she told Penny. "And your suitcase is down from the attic."

"Thank you, Mrs. Gallup," said Penny. "I'll soon have everything packed."

By the time she had completed the task, the housekeeper announced luncheon. Throughout the meal Mr. Nichols laughed and carried on in a high mood, declaring that he felt like a youngster let out of school.

"What shall I do about your mail, sir?" inquired Mrs. Gallup when it was time for Penny and her father to leave.

"Forward letters to me at Knob Hill in care of Judd Kilkane," the detective instructed. "But don't give anyone my address unless it is a matter of great importance."

"I'll be careful about that," Mrs. Gallup promised. "And I do hope you have a good rest in the country, Mr. Nichols."

She watched from the doorway until the car disappeared down the street.

Penny settled herself for a long ride. She switched on the radio and from force of habit turned the dial to the police station broadcast.

"Not that station," said Mr. Nichols.

"I forgot, Dad," laughed Penny. "My mistake."

She tuned to a program of band music and they both listened to it as they drove along. An hour's ride brought them into high hills. From then on they went more slowly, enjoying the view.

Approaching dusk found Penny and her father still several miles from Knob Hill.

"I thought we'd be settled in our cottage by this time," said Mr. Nichols, frowning. "Perhaps we ought to spend the night at a hotel."

"We can decide about that when we reach Knob Hill," Penny replied. "But let's stop somewhere for an early supper. Otherwise, we'll have to buy supplies and carry them with us."

Mr. Nichols turned in at the next roadside cafe. He and Penny enjoyed an excellent meal and then went on once more toward Knob Hill.

It was nearly dark by this time. As they rounded a sharp curve, Mr. Nichols reached down to switch on the headlights. At the same moment Penny gave a little cry of alarm.

"Oh, Dad! There's a car in the ditch!"

Mr. Nichols slammed on the foot brake, for he had seen the wreck at the same instant. A high-powered blue sedan lay on its side in the rain-gutted ditch to the right of the road. One tire was down, and Mr. Nichols judged that a blow-out had caused the accident.

"I wonder if anyone was hurt?" Penny gasped.

Just then a short, squat little man in a long gray overcoat and felt hat stepped out from behind the overturned car. He held up his hand as a signal to Mr. Nichols.

"I see you've had an accident," said the detective as he brought his own car to a standstill at the side of the road. "Anything we can do to help?"

Penny could not see the stranger's face clearly, for his soft felt hat was pulled low over his eyes. His voice, when he spoke, was husky.

"Sure, you can give me a lift if you will. My tire blew out when I was doing seventy. First thing I knew I was in the ditch."

"You're lucky it wasn't a worse accident," replied the detective.

"What's lucky about it?" demanded the stranger irritably.

"Your car doesn't appear much damaged," replied Mr. Nichols, studying the man curiously. "And you don't seem to be hurt. You easily might have been killed traveling at that speed."

"What is this—a lecture in motor safety?" asked the man angrily.

"Not at all," said Mr. Nichols. "Did you say you wanted a ride?"

"Yes; how far are you going?"

"Only to Knob Hill."

"I'll ride along that far anyway," said the stranger.

"My name is Christopher Nichols," the detective introduced himself, "and this is my daughter, Penny."

"Pleased to meet you," muttered the man, without looking directly at either of them. He hesitated, and then added: "I'm Walter Crocker."

"The name sounds familiar," commented Mr. Nichols.

"You may be thinking of my uncle, Herman Crocker. He's well known in these parts."

"I don't believe I know him," replied the detective.

"I'm on my way to see him now," said the man. His voice was bitter. "Herman Crocker is a disreputable crook, even if he is my uncle. He's been stealing from me for years, but it's at an end now! I'll force him to give me my inheritance even if I have to tear him limb from limb——"

"I'd not get so excited if I were you," interrupted Mr. Nichols calmly. "You're probably upset because of the accident."

"It did shake me up a bit," replied Crocker, with an abrupt change of tone.

"Just climb in and we'll take you to town with us," Mr. Nichols invited.

Penny started to move over so that the man could sit beside her.

"Never mind," he said quickly. "I'll ride in the rumble."

"It's not very comfortable," Mr. Nichols warned.

"No matter. I'd rather sit back there."

He climbed into the rumble and Mr. Nichols drove on down the road. Now and then when Penny would glance back through the glass she could see the man gazing intently at her. His scrutiny made her feel very uncomfortable. She wondered if her father shared the feeling. Mr. Nichols was paying close attention to the road, and his masklike face revealed none of his thoughts.

Soon the car drove into the little sleepy village of Kendon which had been settled at the foot of Knob Hill.

"Look for Judd Kilkane's real estate office," the detective told Penny.

"There it is!" she cried a moment later. "On the north side."

Mr. Nichols parked the car in front of the building.

"I'll be back in just a minute," he said to Walter Crocker. "I want to get the key to our cottage from Judd Kilkane."

The man in the rumble made no reply. He sat hunched over in the seat, head bent low.

"Wait a minute, Dad," called Penny. "I'll go with you."

They entered the building, which was little more than a one-story frame shack. The door had been left unlocked, yet Judd Kilkane's office appeared to be deserted.

"This is annoying," said Mr. Nichols. "He's probably out to supper, but it means we may have a long wait."

"We ought to tell Walter Crocker," returned Penny. "Dad, I don't like that fellow. He gives me the creeps."

"He is a bit queer," the detective admitted with a short laugh.

"Dad, do you suppose——"

"No," interrupted Mr. Nichols, "I don't think he's an escaped crook or anything of the sort. Even if he were, I'd not be interested. This is my vacation."

"Oh, all right," laughed Penny. "I was just thinking aloud."

Mr. Nichols opened the door and they walked toward the car together. Suddenly Penny halted, staring toward the rumble seat.

"Why, Dad!" she exclaimed. "Walter Crocker has gone!"

CHAPTER II

Helping a Stranger

CHRISTOPHER NICHOLS saw for himself that the rumble seat was empty. He looked quickly up and down the village street. Walter Crocker was nowhere to be seen.

"Well, that fellow certainly did a speedy disappearing act," the detective commented. "We weren't inside the real estate office five minutes."

"He might at least have thanked us for the ride," said Penny. "Dad, I suppose you'll say this is silly, but I thought he acted as if he were afraid we'd recognize him."

"What made you think that?"

"In the first place he insisted upon riding in the rumble seat. And he kept pulling his hat down over his eyes."

"I'll agree he did act queerly," the detective admitted. "But he's gone now, so we'll just forget about him."

"Oh, all right," laughed Penny. "I keep forgetting that this is your vacation."

A well dressed gentleman in gray came walking leisurely down the street. He gazed curiously at Penny and her father, and they immediately guessed that he might be the missing Judd Kilkane.

"You weren't looking for me by any chance?" the man asked.

"We are if you're Mr. Kilkane," replied the detective.

"That's my name all right. Come on into the office. I stepped out for a minute to buy an evening paper at the drugstore. Say, you're not Nichols from Belton City?"

"Yes," agreed the detective. "You rented me a cottage."

"Old man Crocker's cottage," the real estate agent said as he opened the office door. "I have the key for you."

"Did I understand you to say we are renting the Crocker cottage?" questioned Mr. Nichols quickly.

"Yes, it's owned by old Herman Crocker up on Knob Hill. Do you know him?"

"Oh, I've merely heard his name mentioned," replied the detective carelessly.

"I guess just about everyone has heard tell of Herman," chuckled the real estate man. He sat down at his desk and motioned Penny and her father into near-by chairs. "He's an eccentric character."

"I trust that his cottage is at least habitable," said Mr. Nichols.

Mr. Kilkane looked puzzled. Then his face lighted and he declared heartily: "Oh, you'll find the place to your liking. There's nothing wrong with the cottage. If everything isn't perfectly satisfactory I'll have Herman Crocker fix it right up for you."

"And shall we pay our rent to him?"

"No, I'll take care of that," replied the agent. "Herman said he'd rather not have you coming to the house with the money. As I say, he's something of a recluse."

"We met his nephew this evening."

"His nephew?" asked Mr. Kilkane raising his eyebrows. "That's a new one on me. I didn't know

Herman had one. But then, he's close mouthed."

"We gave this fellow a ride in our car," Mr. Nichols said. "Then he went off somewhere. I suppose he's on his way to see his uncle."

"Did you say that Herman Crocker's home is close to our cottage?" inquired Penny.

"Yes, Miss. They're about a quarter of a mile apart on the Knob Hill road."

"Will we have many other neighbors?" asked the detective.

"None at all," replied the agent, staring at him. "Oh, you'll find it lonely up on Knob Hill. But you said in your letter that you wanted a quiet, isolated place——"

"That's right, Mr. Kilkane. I'm not complaining, merely inquiring. However, it might be wise for us to spend the night at a hotel and pay our first visit to the cottage by daylight."

The real estate agent tapped his pen against the desk and frowned.

"We never had but one hotel here and it went out of business three years ago. I could put you up at my house——"

"No, we don't wish to cause you any trouble," Mr. Nichols said quickly. "Penny and I will just drive on to the cottage."

"You can't miss the place," declared Mr. Kilkane eagerly. "I'll loan you my lantern too."

"Will we need a lantern?" gasped Penny.

"Well, you might, Miss. The cottage is wired for electricity but sometimes the company is slow about getting it turned on."

Penny and her father exchanged a quick glance but offered no comment. Mr. Nichols wrote out a check for the rent and in return received the key to the cottage. Mr. Kilkane carried the lantern out to the car for them and told Mr. Nichols how to reach the place.

"Remember now," he said in parting, "if everything isn't right at the cottage, just let me know."

Mr. Nichols drove through the village and turned up a dark, narrow road which led to the summit of Knob Hill. The highway was densely lined with tall trees whose branches crashed in the wind. Penny and her father could see only a short distance beyond the headlights.

"I don't see how you ever found such an isolated place as this, Dad," Penny remarked as the car labored up the steep incline. "We'll practically be hermits up here."

"So much the better," laughed the detective.

The car rounded a curve in the road, and Penny saw a large, rambling old house with many cupolas, set back amid a grove of evergreen trees.

"That must be Herman Crocker's home," she remarked, turning her head to stare at it. "A gloomy old place."

"Young Walter Crocker had quite a walk if he came up here tonight," said the detective." Too bad he didn't wait. We could have hauled him right to his door."

"I'm just as glad he went off," declared Penny. "Somehow I felt very uneasy when he was riding with us."

The car bumped on until Mr. Nichols saw a narrow lane leading to a tiny cottage on a knoll.

"This must be our little nest," he said, turning in.

The cottage was a plain white frame building

with a cobblestone chimney overgrown by vines. Even at night the grounds appeared unkempt. Several loose shutters flapped in the wind.

Penny and her father stepped from the car and stood staring at the cottage. The low whistle of the wind in the evergreens added to the depressing effect.

"How much rent are we paying for this mansion, Dad?"

"Fifteen a week. But everything is supposed to be furnished."

"Including cobwebs and atmosphere," laughed Penny. "Well, any sum for this tumble-down, antiquated wreck would be robbery! Why, the cottage looks as if it hadn't been occupied in a dozen years."

"I may have been stung," the detective admitted ruefully. "But let's hope it's better inside."

Mr. Nichols carried the suitcases up the weed-choked path. He fumbled in his pockets for the key and finally found it. Mr. Kilkane had told them to enter by the kitchen door.

As it swung back on squeaking hinges, Penny and her father caught a whiff of stale air.

"Just as I thought!" exclaimed Penny. "The place hasn't been opened up in weeks."

Mr. Nichols passed through the doorway into the dark kitchen. He groped about for the electric light switch and could not find it.

"Wait here," he told Penny. "I'll have to go back and get Mr. Kilkane's lantern."

"I'll wait outside the door. It's too stuffy in here."

Penny stood on the sagging porch until her father returned with the lighted lantern. The bright beam illuminated a wide circle of barren kitchen. An old cook stove occupied one corner of the room; there was a plain table with four chairs and a make-shift sink with old-fashioned pump. The floors were without carpet or linoleum. Every piece of furniture was covered by several inches of dust.

"Wait until I see that man Kilkane!" said Mr. Nichols indignantly. "Why, the electricity hasn't even been turned on. We can't live in a place like this!"

"Let's look at the other rooms, Dad."

There was no dining room, as the builder evidently had intended that the occupants should eat in the kitchen. The living room had a large fireplace but no other item of comfort. The three chairs were all straight-backed, the carpet was moth-eaten and dusty, and a small table still bore a vase filled with shriveled flowers which someone had forgotten to throw away.

"Come along, Penny," said Mr. Nichols starting toward the door. "We'll not stay here."

"But where will we go?" Penny placed a detaining hand on his arm. "There's no hotel in the village."

"It would be more pleasant sleeping in the car."

"You know we'd be stiff in every muscle if we tried that, Dad. Let's open a few windows. It won't seem so bad then."

Mr. Nichols raised several windows and they were then able to breathe more freely. An inspection of the adjoining bedrooms left them somewhat encouraged. The mattresses were fairly soft, and Penny found clean linen in one of the bureau drawers.

"I can have these beds made up in just a few minutes," she said cheerfully. "And we can bring in our own blankets from the car."

"Maybe that would be best," the detective agreed. "But we'll leave in the morning."

Penny was abroad at daybreak the next morning. While her father still slept, she explored the grounds, discovering a deep and rather lovely ravine not far from the cottage door. To the right stretched a dense wood and only a short distance on up the road was the summit of Knob Hill.

"This place really isn't half bad by daylight," she told herself. "Dad would be certain to get a complete rest here."

Penny went back into the house and set about cleaning up the kitchen. She had just finished the task when Mr. Nichols appeared in the doorway.

"Are there any mirrors in this place?" he asked irritably. "I'd like to know how I'm to get my whiskers cut off!"

"Why not let them grow?" giggled Penny. "I think you'd look real cute with a beard!"

"Oh, you do?" demanded her father.

"There's a looking glass over the sink," Penny told him. "And plenty of water if you like it cold."

"Why not heat some on the stove?"

"That would be a good idea," Penny admitted, "only I can't find any matches. And apparently one is expected to cut down a tree for wood!"

"We're starting right back to Belton City as soon as I've shaved," said Mr. Nichols firmly.

"No, I've changed my mind about this place, Dad," Penny replied quickly. "If our landlord, Mr. Crocker, will only fix things up, it won't be half bad."

"The cottage would need to be rebuilt to make it comfortable. I doubt that Mr. Crocker will consent to do that."

"He might clean it up for us, furnish wood and clean bedding, and see that the lights are turned on," Penny said. "We could get along then. It wouldn't hurt us to rough it for a few weeks."

"I guess I am too much attached to my comforts," Mr. Nichols smiled. "So you really are willing to stay?"

"I think you'd have a grand rest here."

"And what would you do, Penny?"

"Oh, cook and hike. I'd manage to keep occupied."

"You're being a good sport about this," the detective said gravely. "For myself, I'd not mind staying here. It's a change and that's what I need."

"Then it's settled," laughed Penny. "While you're shaving, I'll run down and see our landlord. Perhaps I can borrow a few supplies from him too."

Mr. Nichols tossed her the car keys.

"No, I'll walk," Penny called over her shoulder as she left the cottage. "I need the exercise."

By daylight the old Crocker home was nearly as gloomy as when viewed amid the shadows. Penny paused at the entrance of the narrow, rutty lane and stared at the place. Everything was quiet. The blinds were all drawn and she could see no one moving about.

"It looks almost as if no one were here," she thought.

The winding lane led through the trees to the house and on either side were rows of tall, uncut privet hedge.

Suddenly as Penny walked hurriedly along, she was startled to see a lean, yellow hound hurl itself over the top of the hedge directly in her path. She stopped short. The animal bared his fangs, growling low.

Penny was not afraid of dogs as a usual thing, but she had never seen a more vicious looking hound. She had every reason to believe that if she tried to go on up the lane he would attack.

Penny reached down and seized a stout stick. She did not know whether to try to advance or retreat.

As she was eying the hound speculatively, Penny heard another sound directly behind her. She whirled about to see an old man with intent dark eyes watching her from beyond the hedge. Only his face was visible for the dense green foliage completely screened his body.

"What do you want here?" asked the old fellow in a harsh voice. "Who are you?"

CHAPTER III

A Queer Old Man

"MY NAME is Penelope Nichols," the girl introduced herself after she had recovered from astonishment. "Are you Mr. Crocker?"

"I am," replied the old man grimly. "What do you want here?"

"Why, my father and I rented your cottage," Penny told him quickly. "Would you mind calling off your dog? He acts as if he'd enjoy chewing me to pieces."

"Rudy has been trained to attack anyone who tries to come up the lane," Herman Crocker said evenly.

He stepped through a gap in the hedge and spoke sharply to the hound. Rudy went reluctantly to the side of his master.

Penny could not help but stare at the old man. He was short and stooped and his clothes were not

very clean. She saw that he was carrying a shotgun.

Herman Crocker studied the girl shrewdly.

"What is it you want of me?" he asked gruffly. "I told Kilkane he was to handle everything about the cottage. I don't want to be bothered."

"Well, I'm sorry, Mr. Crocker, but there are a few details which must be settled if my father and I are to remain."

"What's your complaint?"

"The electricity hasn't been turned on, Mr. Crocker. The cottage needs cleaning. There is no wood. I can't find half enough dishes or cooking pans. We'll need more linen and blankets."

"You can't expect me to fix up the place like it was a palace," complained the old man. "You're only paying fifteen dollars a week."

"If you're unwilling to do anything about it then we'll leave this morning." Penny turned to walk away.

"Here, wait," called the old man. "I'm willing to do anything that's reasonable. Come up to the house and I'll give you some clean linen."

Penny walked with Mr. Crocker up the lane,

trying not to show that she felt uneasy. The old man caught her staring at his shotgun.

"I was hunting squirrels early this morning," he explained.

"Isn't this out of season?" Penny asked before she stopped to think.

Herman Crocker glanced at her with an expression which she was unable to fathom.

"Seasons make no difference to me," he answered shortly. "I go hunting when I please."

They walked on in silence. When they were near the house Penny said casually:

"Oh, by the way, my father and I met your nephew last night."

"My nephew?"

"Why, yes, Walter Crocker. He told us he was on his way to visit you."

Penny saw the old man glance quickly toward her. She could tell that her words had disturbed him.

"Oh, I couldn't think who you meant at first," he muttered. "Yes, Walter was here last night. But he's gone back to the city."

Penny allowed the subject to drop, yet she wondered if Herman Crocker were telling the truth. Had the younger man really visited his uncle for the purpose of claiming an inheritance? He had seemed very bitter toward the old fellow. From her observation of Walter Crocker she did not believe that he was a person who would be easily discouraged in his ambitious designs.

Penny had learned from past experience that if one wished to avoid trouble it did not pay to ask too many questions. More than once an inquiring turn of mind had involved her in strange adventures. Not so many months before this same trait of curiosity had drawn her into a detective case which had baffled the Belton City police. Her clever work, which resulted in the capture of a daring group of auto thieves, is recounted in the first volume of this series, "Penny Nichols Finds a Clue."

Even more recently, Penny had solved a mystery which concerned a queer sculptured figure called The Black Imp. By exposing an unscrupulous dealer in paintings who sought to betray his patrons, she saved many persons from being swindled

and at the same time gained honor for herself.

At the moment, Penny was not eager to involve herself in trouble. She determined to say no more about Walter Crocker unless the old man reopened the subject.

"I'll get the things for you," said Herman Crocker as they reached the kitchen door. "Just wait here."

Penny was a little surprised because the old man did not invite her into the house.

"It won't take me long," he said, deliberately closing the door behind him.

Penny seated herself on the steps of the sagging porch and kept her eye upon Herman Crocker's dog which had stationed himself only a few feet away.

"That animal is vicious," she thought uneasily. "I don't see why Crocker keeps him around."

Hearing a slight sound Penny gazed toward the right and was surprised to observe a small boy peering at her from the corner of the house. He was tall and very thin but did not appear to be more than nine or ten years of age.

"Hello there," said Penny in a friendly voice.

"Hello," answered the boy. He moved slowly toward her, staring rather blankly.

"You're not Mr. Crocker's little boy?" Penny asked, hoping to draw him into conversation.

"I'm his grandson."

"Oh, his grandson," repeated Penny, studying the lad with interest. He bore slight resemblance to Herman Crocker. "And is Rudy your dog?"

"No!" replied the lad bitterly. "I hate him. If I tried to go away from here he'd attack me. My grandfather has trained him to do that."

Penny was not certain that she had understood correctly. She could not believe that Herman Crocker deliberately kept his grandson a prisoner on the property.

"You don't mean——" she began, but the words died away.

The kitchen door had opened. Herman Crocker stood scowling at his grandson.

"Perry!" he said harshly. "Get inside! There's work to be done!"

"Yes, sir," replied the boy meekly.

With a frightened glance directed toward Penny he scuttled into the house. Mr. Crocker closed the door again.

"I do believe that old man was afraid to have me talk with his grandson!" Penny thought shrewdly. "How strange!"

She did not have long to reflect upon the queer actions of her new landlord, for in a very few minutes he reappeared with an armload of linen and blankets.

"I've telephoned the electric company for you," he told her. "Your lights ought to be on before night."

"And will you have the cottage cleaned for us?" Penny requested.

"I can't do the work myself," scowled the man. "But if you want to get Mrs. Masterbrook, I'll pay the bill."

"Who is she?" inquired Penny.

"I'll give you her address. She does cleaning work by the day."

Penny was not very well pleased with the arrangement because it meant that she must make

a special trip to find Mrs. Masterbrook. However, there seemed no other way since the landlord had proved himself to be such an unaccommodating person.

"You'll likely be going in to town sometime today?" ventured Mr. Crocker as Penny turned to leave.

"Why, I imagine so. We'll need supplies."

The man hesitated, and then said in a tone which he tried to make sound casual: "It might be just as well for you not to mention to folks that you saw my nephew. Not that I have any secrets to keep. I just don't like folks nosing into my affairs. Anyway, Walter's gone now and it's no one's business but my own."

"I am a stranger in the community," replied Penny. "I'd have no occasion to speak of your nephew."

"That's what I thought," said Herman Crocker in a tone of relief. "Well, if there's anything more you need, let me know. And I'll see that you get a supply of wood before nightfall."

"Thank you," Penny responded.

She permitted herself a smile as she walked down the lane with the arm load of bedding. It was easy enough to see why Mr. Crocker had become so obliging. He expected a favor in return—her silence regarding Walter Crocker.

"He acts almost as if he is ashamed of his nephew," she thought. "I wonder why he doesn't wish folks to learn about him."

Mr. Nichols had finished shaving by the time Penny reached the cottage.

"Well, I hope you rounded up some breakfast for us," he remarked.

Penny shook her head as she dropped the pile of linen on the table.

"No such luck, Dad. I asked Mr. Crocker for so many things I didn't try to get any food. He's the strangest man!"

"What's so strange about him?"

"I suspect he's a miser or something of the sort. Anyway, he keeps a wicked looking dog and goes around the premises with a shotgun. He won't let his grandson talk with strangers, either."

"You didn't learn much, did you?"

"Well, I didn't have a very good chance," Penny grinned. "You see, he wouldn't let me into the house. I had to wait on the porch while he brought the things."

"Penny, are you making all this up?"

"Of course not!" she retorted indignantly. "Wait until you meet Mr. Crocker. He's a very mysterious character."

"Then I'd just as soon not meet him," laughed the detective. "In my present mood he'd not interest me a bit."

"I'll tell you about the practical results of our talk," smiled Penny. "We're to have all the wood we need and our electric lights should be hooked up by nightfall. Mr. Crocker has promised to pay for having the cottage cleaned. He gave me the name and address of a woman who will do the work."

"That's fine," said the detective. "If she's any good as a housekeeper, why not hire her ourselves by the week? Then you'd be free to roam around and have a good time."

"The idea sounds all right to me," Penny de-

clared quickly. "To tell you the truth, I don't know much about cooking on an old-fashioned stove."

"Let's drive down to the village now," suggested the detective. "We'll have breakfast and then find the cleaning woman."

Penny and her father rode down Knob Hill to the little town of Kendon. Fortified by an excellent meal at the Florence Cafe they set forth to find the home of Anna Masterbrook. They were told that she was a spinster who lived two miles from the village.

"Why, this is the same road we came over last night," Penny observed as they drove along.

"Yes, it is," agreed Mr. Nichols. "For half a cent I'd keep right on going until we reached Belton City."

"Oh, we'll both like it after we get the cottage in order," Penny said cheerfully. "Mrs. Masterbrook may easily turn out to be a diamond in the rough."

"I hope so," sighed Mr. Nichols. "But our luck isn't running very well."

The car rolled over a low hill and Penny observed a curve just ahead.

"Dad, didn't we pick up Walter Crocker at just about this point?" she asked.

"I think this was the place," he agreed.

The car swung slowly around the bend. Both Penny and her father turned their heads to glance toward the ditch. They were surprised to see Walter Crocker's automobile still tipped over on its side. Apparently it had not been greatly damaged.

"Well, that's certainly odd," said Penny as they drove on past the scene of the accident.

"Meaning just what, Penny?"

"Why, it seems queer to me that the car hasn't been towed to a garage," she replied thoughtfully. "Mr. Crocker told me his nephew had gone back to the city. If that is true, why did the man abandon a good automobile?"

CHAPTER IV

Inside Information

"THE garage may be slow in towing the car into town," replied Mr. Nichols. "I've noticed that things don't move at lightning speed around Kendon."

"I suppose that could be the reason," Penny admitted reluctantly. "But wouldn't you think that Walter Crocker would want to find out how much damage had been done to his car before he left?"

"Oh, he may have so much money that it doesn't matter."

"I doubt that, Dad. You remember he told us he was coming here to claim an inheritance. After meeting old Herman I'd guess that he didn't get it. Would you think——"

"I'm not thinking at all these days," chuckled Mr. Nichols. "I've padlocked my brain for two weeks. Please, Penny, don't try to stir up imaginary cases for me to solve."

Penny made no reply, for just then they came within view of an old farmhouse which answered the description provided by Herman Crocker. A tin mailbox by the roadside bore the name Anna Masterbrook.

"This is the right place," Mr. Nichols declared.

They went up the front walk, observing that it had been swept that morning. The porch was freshly scrubbed, too, and clean curtains hung in the windows.

Mrs. Masterbrook must be a good housekeeper," the detective said. "I think we'll employ her if her price is right."

He rapped on the door. After a moment it was opened by a tall, gaunt-looking woman of middle age. Her black hair had been drawn back tightly from her face, accentuating the high cheek bones.

"Mrs. Masterbrook?" inquired the detective, lifting his hat.

"That's my name," said the woman. Her voice was high pitched and unpleasant. "If you're selling anything——"

"I am not a salesman," Mr. Nichols assured her.

"Mr. Crocker sent us to you. I understand that you do cleaning work."

"I worked for Herman Crocker seven years," the woman said. "Precious little pay or thanks I ever got for it too!"

"We are staying in his cottage," Penny explained. "Mr. Crocker said we were to have you clean it up for us, and he would pay the bill."

"How do I know he'll keep his promise?"

"Does Mr. Crocker usually break his word?" asked the detective.

"Well, he's close," Mrs. Masterbrook replied. "A dollar looks as big as a mountain to Herman."

"If Mr. Crocker fails to settle the bill, I'll look after it myself," Mr. Nichols promised. "And another thing. Would you be willing to take a position as housekeeper for a couple of weeks?"

"What would it pay?" Mrs. Masterbrook demanded quickly.

"Well, I might let you name your price."

"Five dollars a week," the woman said firmly after a moment of thought. "I wouldn't come for a cent less."

Penny and Mr. Nichols glanced at each other. They had expected Mrs. Masterbrook to ask double the amount.

"You are hired, Mrs. Masterbrook," said the detective gently.

Penny and her father went back to the car to wait while the woman collected a few things to take with her.

"I think we've found a jewel, Penny," the detective declared enthusiastically. "If I'm any judge of character, she's a good housekeeper."

"And if I'm a judge of it, she's a chronic grumbler and a gossip," replied Penny. "But we're only paying five dollars, so we can't be too particular."

Mrs. Masterbrook soon came down the walk with a small handbag. She crowded into the front seat of the car and even before they were well on their way to Kendon, began to question her new employer. She asked his name, his business, where he was from, why he had come to Kendon and how long he meant to stay.

Penny glanced impishly at her father, who was

growing slightly annoyed. She had warned him that Mrs. Masterbrook would prove to be a gossip.

"I met Mr. Crocker's grandson this morning," she remarked, hoping to switch the conversation to a less personal topic. "He seems like a fine lad."

"Yes, but it's a shame the way Herman brings him up," replied Mrs. Masterbrook, shaking her head sadly. "Perry has never had much schooling and he's kept at home all the time."

"I should think the school authorities would see that the boy attended classes," remarked Mr. Nichols.

"They don't like to cross Herman," Mrs. Masterbrook explained. "At least that's how I figure it."

"Mr. Crocker doesn't actually mistreat the boy?" Penny questioned.

"Herman couldn't be very good to anyone even if he tried. Perry was his daughter Ella's son, and I guess old Herman thought more of Ella than he did of any other member of his family. When she died he took the boy to raise."

"I judge his own wife isn't living," remarked Mr. Nichols.

"No, poor Ida went to her rest come twelve years ago this fall. Folks said she wouldn't have taken down with pneumonia if Herman had given her enough to eat."

Neither Penny nor her father encouraged Mrs. Masterbrook to talk, but all the way to the cottage she chattered about first one person and then another. With no effort on her part, Penny gathered many items of interesting information concerning Herman Crocker.

"Folks around here call him a miser," the woman revealed. "When his sister Jenny died, she left quite a tidy little fortune. Some people don't think Herman ever inherited very much of it, but I could tell 'em a few things about that matter if I were minded to do it."

"I'm sorry," interrupted Mr. Nichols, "but the Crocker family isn't of great interest to us. Suppose we forget about it."

"I thought you wanted to hear," retorted Mrs. Masterbrook indignantly. She subsided into hurt silence.

Penny felt sorry that her father had discouraged

the woman from talking. Although she did not approve of idle gossip, she had been eager to learn more about Herman Crocker and his queer relatives. She wondered too if Mrs. Masterbrook could tell her anything about Mr. Crocker's nephew, Walter.

Penny and her father left the housekeeper at the cottage and then drove back to the village for supplies.

"I'm afraid I made a great mistake in hiring her," confessed the detective. "She'll talk us crazy."

"At least you must admit it's interesting to have all the inside information about our landlord."

"I'm not concerned in Crocker's affairs," Mr. Nichols rejoined. "Anyway, I'd not believe a word that woman said about him. Obviously, she bears a grudge."

Penny and her father made their purchases in one of the grocery stores, finding the owner a pleasant, genial individual. During the course of the conversation he remarked upon the automobile accident which had occurred the previous night.

"It's a funny thing about it," he said. "The

owner of the car disappeared and no one seems to know the driver."

"Why, my daughter and I brought him to town last night," declared Mr. Nichols quickly. "He was Herman Crocker's nephew, or so he told us."

"You don't say! Well, that's the first time I ever heard that Herman had a living nephew. Shall I carry these packages out to the car for you?"

"Yes, please," requested the detective.

The storekeeper deposited the grocery order in the automobile and then went back into his shop.

"Dad, Mr. Crocker asked me not to tell anyone about his nephew's having been here," Penny said as they started up Knob Hill.

"Well, I didn't make any such promise," replied her father. "I can't see why there should be any mystery about it. Anyway, it will be fairly easy for the police to learn the man's name by tracing the license plates of his abandoned car."

"Yes, that's true," Penny agreed. "I can't for the life of me understand why Walter Crocker would go back to the city without trying to salvage his car."

"I'd not worry about it too much," smiled the detective. "For all we know he may have left orders at one of the garages to have it hauled in and repaired."

Upon arriving at their cottage, Mr. Nichols and Penny were pleasantly surprised to find Mrs. Masterbrook hard at work. She had cleaned up all the rooms, and she came out to the car to help carry in the groceries.

"The electric company man was here while you were gone," she told Mr. Nichols. "The lights are on now."

"Fine," replied the detective. "And how about our supply of wood?"

"Herman sent over enough for today and tomorrow. He said he'd get busy and cut more. But I'd not count on it. Herman is as lazy as all get out."

Mr. Nichols laughed and told the housekeeper that he and Penny were going for a little walk before lunch.

"It will be ready at one o'clock sharp," Mrs. Masterbrook warned. "I hope you'll be back on time, because I don't like to keep victuals waiting."

"We'll be here," promised the detective. When he and Penny were beyond hearing, he added: "I'm afraid we made a big mistake in hiring that woman. I can see right now that she means to be the boss of the show."

"Oh, well, if the weather is nice we can stay away from the cottage most of the time," laughed Penny.

After exploring the ravine, they went back to the cottage to find that luncheon was nearly ready. In justice to Mrs. Masterbrook, the detective admitted that the meal was excellent. She had made biscuits, cake, and gravy, besides preparing the usual vegetables and meat.

However, without being requested to do so, the housekeeper seated herself at the head of the table. Penny and her father had assumed that she would take her meals alone, but neither of them had the courage to make the suggestion. They were a little afraid of the woman's sharp tongue.

Conversation was difficult in Mrs. Masterbrook's presence. Penny and Mr. Nichols did not wish to say anything of a personal nature lest the

housekeeper repeat it to her acquaintances. Mrs. Masterbrook talked enough for everyone. She prattled on about the gossip of the town until Penny and her father were thoroughly bored. They were relieved when the meal was over.

"I believe I'll drive back to town this afternoon," the detective announced. "I want to buy a newspaper, and I'll order a telephone installed."

"I thought you were eager to lose contact with the world," laughed Penny.

"To a certain extent—yes," replied Mr. Nichols. "But I also like to keep informed."

"You don't need to worry about that part," chuckled Penny. "Mrs. Masterbrook will see to it that you're up to date on all the news."

"She'll probably appropriate the telephone too," said the detective ruefully. "But I think I'll put one in anyway. Coming with me, Penny?"

"No, I'd rather stay here, Dad. I thought I'd write a letter to Susan."

After her father had driven away, Penny unpacked her suitcase. Then she carried her writing materials to a pleasant nook not far from the

ravine, finding a flat rock which served as a desk.

The letter was soon finished. Penny sealed it and then sat for a long time gazing at the distant trees which were waving gently in the breeze.

"It's nice here," she thought dreamily, "but rather dull. I wish Susan could visit me. Together we might stir up a little excitement."

After a while Penny dozed off. When she awoke she gathered up her writing things and walked back to the house. She chanced to be wearing tennis shoes and so made very little noise as she entered.

Penny had no intention of trying to spy upon Mrs. Masterbrook. In fact, she had forgotten all about the housekeeper as she made her way toward her own bedroom.

The kitchen and living rooms were in order but quite deserted. The significance of this did not dawn upon Penny.

Then she came to the doorway of her father's bedroom. She might have passed it without a glance had she not heard a startled cry.

"Oh, I didn't hear you come in!" muttered Mrs. Masterbrook in confusion.

The woman had been caught in the act of examining letters and papers contained in Mr. Nichols' suitcase. She straightened up quickly, a deep flush spreading over her cheeks.

"Mrs. Masterbrook!" said Penny sternly. "Kindly explain the meaning of this! Why are you prying into my father's private papers?"

CHAPTER V

A Night Visitor

"HOW dare you accuse me of such a thing!" exclaimed Mrs. Masterbrook angrily. "I merely came into this bedroom to do the work for which I was hired."

"Did my father employ you to read his private letters?" asked Penny coldly.

"I was cleaning the room and I thought I would unpack the suitcase. I had just come upon these letters when you walked in."

"I'll relieve you of them now," said Penny. "Hereafter, please don't touch anything either in father's suitcase or my own."

Mrs. Masterbrook did not trust herself to reply. With an angry toss of her head she marched back to the kitchen, slamming the door behind her.

"I don't care if she is out of sorts!" Penny thought. "Dad ought to discharge her for a trick like this."

She returned the letters to the suitcase and after locking the bag took the key with her. Later in the afternoon when Mr. Nichols came back to the cottage in company with one of the telephone men, she drew him aside to reveal what the housekeeper had done.

"It's nothing so very serious," the detective said. "Of course the trick was a contemptible one, but I doubt that she learned anything of interest. The letters all dealt with matters of routine business."

"But if Mrs. Masterbrook reads our letters she'll pry into other things too."

"We could discharge her," the detective said, frowning thoughtfully. "The point is—where would we get another housekeeper on short notice? Especially one who can cook."

"Mrs. Masterbrook does do her work well," Penny admitted grudgingly.

"I'll discharge her if you say the word, Penny."

"No, let her stay," the girl decided. "But we'll have to be very careful about what we do and say around her."

With a telephone installed, the electric lights

connected, and the house stocked with groceries, Penny and her father felt that they were fairly well established in the cottage. As was to be expected, Mrs. Masterbrook acted very distant during the remainder of the day. She went about the house with an injured air which was amusing to Penny and Mr. Nichols.

Toward evening the telephone rang.

"Why, that was a long and two short!" exclaimed Penny, springing up from her chair. "That's our ring."

"Must be a mistake," replied Mr. Nichols. "No one would be calling us so soon."

Before Penny could reach the telephone, Mrs. Masterbrook answered it. She appeared in the doorway and said primly to Mr. Nichols:

"Long distance is calling."

"Long distance!" exclaimed the detective. "That's queer. How did anyone get my number so soon?"

"I'm sure you can't blame *that* on me," replied the housekeeper maliciously.

Mr. Nichols went to answer the call. Penny no-

ticed that Mrs. Masterbrook lingered not far away, evidently listening. Upon seeing that the girl was watching, she retreated to the kitchen.

In a few minutes Mr. Nichols returned to the living room.

"I hope nothing is wrong at home," Penny said in a low tone. She was afraid the call had been from Mrs. Gallup.

"No, everything is all right," returned the detective. "That was Inspector Harris who telephoned me."

"But how did he get your telephone number?"

"Oh, he plagued Mrs. Gallup into revealing our address, and then he found that we had a telephone installed today. Worse luck!"

"Mrs. Gallup was instructed not to tell where we were unless something of great importance arose."

"The inspector evidently convinced her that this was a vital matter."

"What is it all about anyway?" Penny inquired curiously.

"Inspector Harris wants me to take a new case.

Last night a big robbery was committed at Hannibal, which is the nearest town to Kendon. The inspector thought that since I was on the scene it would be convenient for me to conduct the investigation."

"Convenient for him."

"Obviously."

Penny glanced quickly at her father. "And what did you tell him, Dad?"

"I said I wouldn't do it. This is my vacation and I mean to enjoy it."

"Good for you, Dad," Penny said approvingly.

"The inspector didn't like to take 'no' for an answer," Mr. Nichols went on. "He claimed that this was not an ordinary robbery case and that I'd be sorry if I turned it down."

"What was so unusual about it, Dad?"

"Nothing that I could tell. A private home was entered and the thieves escaped with about a thousand dollars' worth of jewelry. The owner, a man of wealth, insists upon private detectives taking over the case. He's not satisfied with the local police talent."

While Penny and her father were discussing the robbery, Mrs. Masterbrook announced dinner. To their relief, she did not talk during the meal but maintained an aloof air.

"I don't like the look of the weather," remarked Mr. Nichols, glancing out the window. "I shouldn't be surprised if we have a storm tonight."

"The wind does appear to be rising," Penny agreed. "Just listen to it whistle in the grove of evergreens—it gives one a creepy feeling."

"I hope we have a good roof over us," Mr. Nichols declared. "One that doesn't leak."

As he spoke, the room was suddenly plunged into darkness.

"Mercy on us!" screamed Mrs. Masterbrook in terror. "What's happened to the lights?"

"Probably the current has been turned off, or the high wind may have broken a wire," said the detective calmly.

"Or a fuse may have blown out," Penny added.

"I'll get my flashlight from the car and take a look," said Mr. Nichols. "I don't know if I can locate the fuse box or not."

"It's in the cellar," contributed Mrs. Masterbrook.

"The only way to get down there is from the outside of the cottage," Penny added. "Those strange-looking double doors with the iron rings pull up, and beneath them is a stone stairway which leads into the cellar. Be careful, for it's easy to fall. I took a tumble myself this afternoon when I was prowling around."

Mr. Nichols groped his way to the door and disappeared into the night. A few minutes later Penny saw the beam of his flashlight playing over the lawn. Then the cellar doors were thrown back and the light vanished.

"You'd not catch me going down into that dark, damp hole at night!" Mrs. Masterbrook said in a low voice.

"Why not?" asked Penny. "Isn't it just as dark here?"

"Something might happen. If you knew what I do about this place——"

"What do you mean?" questioned Penny quickly.

"Oh, I don't tell everything I know," the housekeeper retorted.

Penny felt certain that the woman was trying to plague her, but nevertheless she was greatly relieved when her father returned to the kitchen.

"It was only a blown fuse after all," he reported. "But I can't find any extra ones."

"I'll telephone Mr. Crocker!" Penny announced. "He's our landlord and he ought to work at the job."

"I'll bet a cent you don't get any," the detective rejoined.

After a lengthy telephone conversation, Penny faced her father triumphantly.

"You lose your cent," she laughed. "Mr. Crocker was provoked, but he promised to come right over with a new fuse."

Twenty minutes later an ancient automobile was heard laboring up Knob Hill. Mr. Crocker came up the walk, carrying a lighted lantern.

"Seems like you folks are having a lot of trouble here," he said crossly as Mr. Nichols met him at the door.

"We're sorry to trouble you," replied the detective. "If the cottage had been better equipped——"

"I'll put in the fuse for you to be sure it's good," Mr. Crocker interrupted.

He and Mr. Nichols went down into the cellar together. From the doorway of the kitchen Penny noticed that someone was sitting in Mr. Crocker's car.

"Is that you, Perry?" she called softly.

There was no answer, so she walked down to the car. Mr. Crocker's grandson sat hunched down in the front seat.

"Aren't you going to say hello to me?" asked Penny. "I do believe you're shy."

"I'm not shy," replied the little boy quickly. "But my grandpa says he'll whip me if I talk with you."

Penny was silent for a moment.

"Of course I don't wish you to get into trouble, Perry," she said quietly, "but why doesn't your grandfather like me?"

"Because you'll ask too many questions," the

boy answered. "Please go away now, before grandpa finds you talking with me."

The cottage became flooded with light as Mr. Nichols and Herman Crocker replaced the old fuse. Penny knew that they would be coming up the steps in a moment. She did not wish Perry to be punished so she slipped back into the house.

However, as soon as Herman Crocker had driven away Penny ran back outside to meet her father. She told him what Perry had said.

"Herman Crocker is a queer old duck," the detective replied. "I don't doubt he abuses the boy."

"We ought to do something about it, Dad," Penny said earnestly.

"Now don't get worked up over the affair. We haven't any proof that the boy is mistreated. If the local authorities aren't interested in the case, we have no call to interfere. We'd only stir up a tempest in a teapot."

"I suppose you're right," Penny admitted reluctantly. "You usually are."

"I'd forget the Crocker family if I were you. Try to enjoy your vacation."

Penny did not wish to forget about Perry. She felt that he deserved a better fate than life with a queer old man like Herman Crocker.

Later in the evening as she sat with a book, she kept thinking of the boy. She could not keep her mind on anything she read.

At nine o'clock it began to rain. The wind, steadily growing stronger, rattled the windowpanes.

"I'm afraid this will be a noisy place tonight," commented Mr. Nichols. "But I'm drowsy enough to sleep through anything."

Mrs. Masterbrook had retired soon after the dishes were washed. After getting himself a drink in the kitchen, Mr. Nichols announced that he too was going to bed.

"I'll be coming along in a few minutes," Penny said. "How about the doors? Shall I lock them?"

"Oh, it wouldn't do any harm," replied the detective carelessly. "But on a night like this there's no chance anyone will visit us——"

Mr. Nichols' voice trailed slowly away. As if in contradiction to his words, there came a sharp rap on the door.

CHAPTER VI

The Attic Door

"IT SEEMS that you are wrong, Dad," commented Penny dryly. "Already we have a visitor."

Mr. Nichols went to the door and flung it open. The light revealed a bedraggled young man who might have been in his early twenties. He was not very well dressed and his clothes were rain soaked. Penny and her father regarded the stranger a trifle suspiciously until he spoke.

"I beg you pardon," the young man said apologetically, "but I am looking for the Herman Crocker place. Would you be kind enough to direct me?"

"Why, certainly," replied the detective. "Come in out of the rain, won't you?"

"Thanks, but my shoes are covered with mud."

"You can't harm anything in this cottage," said Penny. "Come right in."

The young man stepped over the threshold, removing his limp felt hat. He had sandy hair, Penny observed, and penetrating blue eyes which roved swiftly about the room.

"It's a nasty night," said Mr. Nichols. "Have you walked far?"

"All the way from Kendon."

"Then you went right past Herman Crocker's place. It's a large house to the left of the road."

"The rain is coming down so fast I couldn't see very far ahead of me," the young man replied. "This was the first light I saw along the way."

"It may be that Mr. Crocker has gone to bed," Penny remarked. "I imagine he retires early."

"Will he be expecting you?" inquired the detective.

"Why, no, he won't," the young man replied after a slight hesitation. "I suspect he'll be very much surprised to see me."

"We have a telephone," Penny said. "If you like, I'll call Mr. Crocker for you. He might be willing to drive up and get you."

"Oh, please don't go to any bother," returned

the young man quickly, edging toward the door again.

"It won't be any trouble at all."

"Please, I'd rather you wouldn't. I'll not mind the walk."

Penny glanced sharply at the young man. It was plain to see that he had some special motive for not wishing to give Herman Crocker advance notice of his arrival in the community.

Without having any real reason for such a belief, it suddenly struck Penny that the young man's visit might have some connection with the mysterious call which Walter Crocker had made upon his uncle.

"I take it you're a stranger in these parts," remarked Mr. Nichols. He too was studying the young man curiously.

"Well, yes, I am. I'm here to see Mr. Crocker on rather important business."

"You'll be his second out-of-town visitor this week," Penny commented in a casual tone. "Mr. Crocker's nephew was here, but I understand he has gone back to the city."

"Mr. Crocker's nephew?" asked the young man quickly.

"Yes," said Penny, watching him closely. "Walter Crocker."

A strange look came into the young man's eyes. An expression of astonishment gave way to one of wariness.

"You are acquainted with Walter Crocker perhaps?" asked Penny, ignoring her father's warning glance.

"I have heard of him," replied the young man after a brief hesitation. He turned once more toward the door.

As he opened it a strong gust of wind blew a sheet of rain into the room.

"See here, you can't go out in that," said Mr. Nichols firmly. "Let me telephone Crocker and tell him you're here."

The young man shook his head.

"Then I'll put on chains and take you down there in my car."

"No, I'd rather not have you go to any bother on my account. I don't mind a little rain."

"It's blowing a gale and the storm is getting worse every minute," the detective insisted. "Herman Crocker keeps a vicious dog too. If you walk in there without being expected, you may receive an unpleasant reception."

"I wasn't looking for a very cordial one anyway," the young man said slowly. "But thanks for the tip about the dog. Maybe it would be just as well to go back to town for the night."

"There's no need to do that," said Mr. Nichols. "You're welcome to stay here if you like. Our quarters aren't very luxurious, but at least it will be better than walking back to the village."

"I'll get Mrs. Masterbrook to help me fix up one of the bedrooms right away," Penny added quickly.

"It's very kind of you," said the young man, looking troubled. "You know nothing about me——"

"We're not worried upon that score," replied Mr. Nichols with a smile. "But you might tell us your name."

"Oh, yes, to be sure——" stammered the young man. "Just call me Michael—Michael Haymond."

"I am very glad to know you, Mr. Haymond," returned the detective. "May I take your coat and hat? I'll build up the fire so that your things will dry out."

Penny crossed the room intending to call Mrs. Masterbrook. As she opened the door leading into the hallway she saw the housekeeper hastily retreating into her own bedroom. Obviously she had been listening to the conversation.

"Mrs. Masterbrook!" called Penny.

"Well, what is it?" asked the housekeeper, reopening her door.

"A guest is spending the night. Will you please help me prepare the east bedroom?"

"This is a nice time to start making up beds," the housekeeper complained. "I was just ready to undress."

"I'm sorry to bother you, Mrs. Masterbrook. I'll do it myself."

"I didn't say I wasn't willing to help," the housekeeper said quickly. "Only if you ask me, you're making a big mistake to take a perfect stranger into the house."

"What makes you think he's a stranger?" asked Penny quickly.

"I couldn't help hearing what he told you," Mrs. Masterbrook returned with a toss of her head. "I don't believe for a single minute that his name is Michael Haymond. Anyone could tell that he was lying."

"Who do you think he is?" asked Penny. "A 'G' man in disguise?"

"He looks more like a young criminal to me," Mrs. Masterbrook replied soberly. "His face is very familiar."

"Dear me, how did you manage to see him? Not through the keyhole?"

The housekeeper had not meant to betray herself. She flushed and made no answer.

"If you care to meet Mr. Haymond, come into the living room," Penny invited. "I think you'll find him to be a very nice young man."

"No, thank you, I don't wish to meet him," said the housekeeper coldly. "And if the cottage is robbed during the night, kindly don't blame me."

"All right, I won't," laughed Penny.

The bedroom which the guest was to occupy adjoined Mr. Nichols' sleeping quarters. Long after the house had settled down for the night, Penny could hear sounds from that part of the cottage. Either her father or Mr. Haymond was very restless.

"It may have been unwise to take a stranger into the house," the girl reflected, "but he seemed honest enough. I don't see why Mrs. Masterbrook had to act so hateful about it."

For some time Penny remained awake thinking over the information which Michael Haymond had given about himself. He had not told where he lived nor had he mentioned the nature of his business with Herman Crocker. She had fancied that the young man had seemed somewhat shaken by her reference to Walter Crocker.

"I may have imagined that part," she told herself. "Dad didn't seem to notice anything wrong."

Shortly Penny fell asleep. Several hours later she found herself wide awake again. She did not know what had aroused her.

Although Penny had left the curtains up, the

room was dark. She could still hear the rain pattering against the tin roof.

Then the girl became aware of another sound. She heard a floor board creak. Someone was moving softly down the hallway.

"I wonder who is up at this hour?" she thought.

For a minute Penny lay perfectly still, listening. Then she crept noiselessly from bed. Drawing on her dressing gown, she tiptoed to the door.

The hall was dark. At first she could distinguish nothing; then she made out a shadowy figure at the far end. Someone was trying to open the door which led up to the attic.

CHAPTER VII

Penny's Discovery

"IS THAT you, father?" Penny asked.

When there was no answer, she reached up and pressed the electric switch. The hallway became flooded with light. Penny and Michael Haymond stood blinking at each other, both deeply embarrassed.

"Oh, I'm sorry," stammered the young man. "I didn't mean to disturb anyone. I was just after a drink of water."

"I'm afraid you won't find it in the attic," replied Penny. "Not unless the roof is leaking."

"The attic?" Michael Haymond repeated. "I must be turned around then. I thought this door led to the living room."

Penny could not be certain whether or not the young man was telling the truth. It was entirely possible that he had become confused in the dark hallway. She could not imagine any reason why

he would have wished to investigate the attic.

Before Penny could frame a reply Mr. Nichols' door opened and the detective peered out.

"Anything wrong?" he asked.

"I am afraid I have disturbed the entire household," the young man apologized. "I was only looking for a drink of water."

"There's no harm in that, I'm sure," replied Mr. Nichols pleasantly. "I'll get you one."

"It really doesn't matter," the young man murmured.

Just then Mrs. Masterbrook's door swung open. The housekeeper, garbed in an old-fashioned nightgown and with her hair done up in curlers, looked out into the hall.

"Dear me, what is going on here?" she asked crossly. "After working hard all day I'd like to get a little sleep."

"It was all my fault," Michael Haymond apologized again.

The housekeeper turned to gaze at him. As their eyes met, Mrs. Masterbrook made a strange rasping sound in her throat. Her hand moved in-

stinctively toward her face as if to ward off a blow.

"Mrs. Masterbrook, I don't believe you have met our guest," Mr. Nichols began.

The housekeeper gave him no opportunity to finish. She moved back into her bedroom and closed the door.

"Did I offend your housekeeper?" asked Michael Haymond anxiously.

"Don't give it a thought," replied Mr. Nichols, lowering his voice. "Mrs. Masterbrook is a very odd character. She may have felt embarrassed because she wasn't dressed up for the occasion. Come along now and we'll get that drink of water."

Penny went back into her room and sat down on the bed. Apparently her father had not distrusted Michael Haymond's motives nor had he considered Mrs. Masterbrook's rude action as anything out of the way.

"Dad takes everything casually," Penny thought.

She could hear her father and Michael Haymond in the kitchen laughing and talking together. The icebox door slammed shut. Evidently they were indulging in a snack of food.

"Mrs. Masterbrook will be furious in the morning," Penny chuckled. "She seems to detest Michael Haymond anyway. For a moment I thought she appeared to recognize him, but I suppose she was merely trying to be dramatic. That's the trouble with Mrs. Masterbrook—she's usually acting a part."

Penny allowed her thoughts to ramble at will until she heard her father and Michael Haymond enter their rooms. The hall light was switched out. Once more the house quieted down.

Penny crept back into bed, but she could not sleep. She felt strangely excited.

Throughout the night there was no further disturbance. After a few hours the rain ceased and stars began to straggle through the clouds. The wind died down.

Penny tossed restlessly upon her pillow. Now and then she could hear Mrs. Masterbrook's bed creak in the next room as if the housekeeper also were spending a sleepless night.

At dawn Penny arose and, quietly dressing, let herself out of the cottage. The grounds were

muddy, but everything seemed fresh and green. Birds chirped and the earth gave off a pleasant odor.

At breakfast time Penny returned to the house, feeling none the worse for her sleepless night. As she approached the porch she saw her father and the guest talking earnestly. They turned to greet her.

"Aren't you an early bird this morning, Penny?" inquired her father.

"Oh, I just went for a little walk before breakfast, Dad."

Mrs. Masterbrook appeared in the doorway.

"You're lucky to get anything to eat this morning," she said stiffly. "There's something the matter with the stove. It doesn't draw properly and we're practically out of wood."

"Anything else wrong about the place?" Mr. Nichols asked with a sigh.

"There are enough odd jobs around here to keep a man busy for a week," replied the housekeeper. "The water pump isn't working well and someone ought to put on the screens."

"I'll be glad to do that for you," offered Michael Haymond. "And I'm good at cutting wood too. Is there an ax around here anywhere?"

"I think I saw one in the basement," Mr. Nichols told him. "But see here—you're our guest."

"I'll be glad to do a little to earn my breakfast. I like to work."

"I can see you do," Mr. Nichols smiled. He studied the young man for a moment. Then he asked abruptly, "How would you like a steady job for a few days?"

"Doing what?"

"All the odd jobs I'm supposed to do. Can you drive a car?"

"Yes."

"Then you could drive to town for our groceries, see that we have a daily wood supply, and repair all the things around here that are falling to pieces."

"Our landlord is expected to see that the place is in livable condition," Penny said quickly. She felt a little troubled because her father wished to engage the strange young man.

"If we wait for him to take care of things, we'll never be comfortable here," returned Mr. Nichols. He turned again to Michael Haymond. "Perhaps I have spoken out of turn. Probably you aren't in need of a job."

"But I am," replied the young man quickly. "I'll be glad to work for my board and room."

"I think we can do better than that for you," smiled Mr. Nichols. "Your salary won't be large, but we'll keep you in spending money at least."

"What shall I do first? Chop the wood?"

"You might look at the stove and see if you can discover what is wrong with it."

"O.K.," laughed the young man. "I know a little about cook stoves. We had one at the——"

He stopped abruptly and then finished in confusion: "We had a cook stove at the place where I lived."

"And where was that, young man?" asked Mrs. Masterbrook tartly.

"It doesn't matter in the least," interposed Mr. Nichols smoothly. "Mr. Haymond's affairs are his own."

"There's no great mystery about my past," said the young man. "I came from the West. My parents are dead."

"I'm sorry to hear that," replied Mr. Nichols sympathetically.

Michael Haymond stood gazing thoughtfully toward the ravine for a moment. Then, recovering himself, he followed Mrs. Masterbrook into the house to look at the cook stove.

"Now Penny—don't say it," declared Mr. Nichols when he was alone with his daughter.

"Don't say what, Dad?"

"That I'm making a big mistake to hire young Haymond. I can see you feel that way."

"Well, yes, I do," Penny admitted. "I like Michael a lot, but I don't exactly trust him. He hasn't told us much about himself——"

"That's his own business. I haven't any patience with folks who go prying into other persons' private affairs."

"I thought that was the work of a detective," Penny said teasingly.

"When a man commits a crime, then his actions

become a matter of public concern," Mr. Nichols replied. "I had a long talk with Michael last night and if I'm any judge of character, he's a decent sort. I don't intend to pry into his personal affairs just for the pleasure of it."

"Well, if the tin spoons disappear don't blame me," Penny laughed, imitating the housekeeper's shrill voice.

"Young Michael will save me a great deal of petty annoyance," Mr. Nichols went on. "I mean for him to serve as a buffer between me and Mrs. Masterbrook."

"For some reason she's taken an intense dislike to him, Dad."

"I noticed that, Penny. Mrs. Masterbrook isn't happy unless she is reading the law to someone. With young Michael here, she'll vent her spite on him and leave us to enjoy our vacation."

"How marvelously your mind works, Dad!"

"I do think of a smart idea now and then."

"Wouldn't it be wiser to discharge Mrs. Masterbrook?"

"She bakes wonderful biscuits," the detective

answered. "Besides, she amuses me. I'm curious to see how she gets on with young Michael."

"You're beyond my depth," Penny said with a shrug. "I don't understand your whims at all."

She was forced to admit that from the standpoint of work her father had made no mistake in hiring the young man. Michael put the cooking stove in good order again, chopped a day's supply of wood and repaired the pump. He worked quietly, yet effectively. Even the housekeeper could find no complaint to voice.

"Michael, I suppose you'll be wanting to see Herman Crocker sometime today," Mr. Nichols remarked to the young man.

"Why, yes, sir, I guess so," he replied uncertainly.

"You said that was why you came here," the detective reminded him.

"Yes, sir. I do want to see Mr. Crocker on a matter of business."

"Feel free to run down there whenever you like," Mr. Nichols told him. "You've done enough work around here for one day."

"Thank you, sir."

Mr. Nichols went for a long walk in the woods but Penny chose to remain at the cottage with a magazine. Michael worked about the yard, washing the automobile. He did not seem in any hurry to make his call upon Herman Crocker.

"I don't believe he's anxious to go there at all," Penny thought. "I wonder if he didn't make up the entire story?"

She was somewhat surprised to observe that for the most part Mrs. Masterbrook left the young man entirely alone. The housekeeper seemed more subdued than usual as if she were brooding over some matter.

The day passed quickly. Penny knew very well that Michael had not visited Herman Crocker for she had kept watch of him the entire time. She had a theory that he did not wish to go there at all, and to test it she called the young man.

"Michael," she said, "Mrs. Masterbrook tells me that we need fresh eggs. I'm driving down to Crocker's place after supper to get some. Don't you wish to ride along with me?"

The young man hesitated, his eyes dropping before Penny's steady gaze.

"Why, I thought I'd wait until tomorrow before I see Mr. Crocker. Thanks just the same."

When supper was over, Penny drove down to the Crocker place. No lights were visible in the window. Either the owner had gone away or was trying to save electricity.

Penny parked the car in the lane. She looked carefully about for the yellow hound. To her relief he was nowhere around the place. Quickly she walked across the yard and pounded on the door.

Penny waited a few minutes and then turned back to the car. She halted as she heard a rap on one of the windows. Glancing up, she saw Perry looking out at her.

"Oh, hello, Perry," Penny called. "Open the door."

"I can't," shouted the boy through the glass. "It's locked."

"Isn't your grandfather here?"

The lad shook his head. "He's been gone all day. I'm locked up in here."

"Can't you open a window?" Penny called.

Again Perry shook his head. "I haven't had anything except bread to eat all day," he told her. "I'm getting real hungry."

"Well, I should think so," said Penny grimly.

She observed that the lower floor windows were all high from the ground, beyond the reach of anyone in the yard.

"Aren't any of the upstairs windows unfastened?" she called to the boy.

"Yes, but I can't get out there."

"Does your grandfather have a ladder?"

"I think there's one somewhere in the barn."

"I'll find it," Penny said encouragingly. "Just you wait until I come back, Perry."

She hurried off to the barn, well aware that in taking matters into her own hands, she was certain to incur the wrath of Herman Crocker.

"I don't care if I do get into trouble," she thought indignantly. "He has no right to shut Perry up in the house without anything to eat. It's cruel."

Penny opened the barn doors and stepped in-

side. She stopped short to stare at an automobile which stood on the floor beside the granary. One glance assured her that it was not Herman Crocker's ancient car. This was an expensive model with a streamline design, shiny and new save that one fender was slightly battered.

"Why, it's Walter Crocker's automobile!" Penny thought in amazement. "How did it get here?"

CHAPTER VIII

The Toy Lantern Clue

PENNY stood staring at the car. She knew she could not be mistaken. It was the same automobile which Walter Crocker had upset in the ditch. She had last seen it there when she and her father had gone after Mrs. Masterbrook.

"I suppose Walter Crocker might have instructed his uncle to bring the car here," Penny mused. "But it seems very odd. Old Herman didn't want me to tell anyone about seeing his nephew here. I wonder——"

The girl's thoughts were rudely interrupted by the sound of a car coming up the lane. Glancing out the barn doors Penny saw Herman Crocker arrive in his battered old automobile. He parked beside her own car.

"Of course he'll know I am here," Penny told herself. "I must act as if I've noticed nothing out of the way."

She slipped out of the barn without being observed. As she approached the house, Old Herman climbed from the car, holding fast to Rudy's chain. The hound began to growl and tried to get away from his master.

"Good evening, Mr. Crocker," said Penny pleasantly. "I don't seem to be very popular with your dog."

"I thought that was your car standing here in the lane," replied Mr. Crocker gruffly. "Did I see you coming from the barn?"

"I had started that way," said Penny. "Then I heard your car coming."

Mr. Crocker seemed to relax.

"What's wrong down at the cottage now?" he asked in the tone of one who had deeply suffered.

"Nothing at all, Mr. Crocker. I came to ask if I might buy some fresh eggs."

"I don't make a practice of selling them," the man frowned.

"Then I suppose I'll have to drive in to town."

"Maybe I can let you have a dozen this time."

Mr. Crocker started toward the house but as

Penny followed he turned and said pointedly:

"I'll bring them out to the car."

Penny had hoped that she would have an opportunity to speak with Perry. She wished to warn the boy to say nothing about her plan to help him escape from the house. She could only hope that he would be wise enough to remain silent concerning her presence near the barn.

Mr. Crocker did not unlock the front door. Instead he went around to the back porch and from a box which was stored there, counted out a dozen eggs into a paper sack. He returned to the car.

"How much do I owe you, Mr. Crocker?" asked Penny.

The man named a price fifteen cents above the town market. She paid it without a protest.

"How is your grandson, Perry?" Penny asked casually as she prepared to drive away.

Mr. Crocker glanced at her sharply but the girl's face disclosed only polite interest.

"Oh, the boy's fine," he answered gruffly. "He's somewhere around the place."

Penny said goodbye and drove away without

disclosing that she knew Perry had been locked in the house during his grandfather's absence. Such treatment seemed nothing short of cruel to her. She could not understand why the townspeople would show such indifference to the lad's fate unless they were unaware of existing conditions.

Upon reaching the cottage, Penny drew her father aside and reported everything she had learned.

"You're sure that the boy told the truth about having no food?" the detective inquired.

"I can't be absolutely certain," Penny admitted. "I've never been inside the house."

"Always there are two sides to every question," Mr. Nichols said slowly. "Folks around here with the exception of Mrs. Masterbrook, seem to think that Crocker isn't a bad sort."

"I'm positive he's not the right person to have entire control of a child, Dad."

"That may be. However, he gave the boy a home when no one else came forward to take him in."

"How do you account for Walter Crocker's car being in Herman's barn?"

"I don't see anything so mysterious about that, Penny. They are relatives. Walter probably asked Herman to have the car hauled there until he came back from the city."

"How do we know he ever went to the city, Dad?"

"What?" asked Mr. Nichols blankly.

Penny repeated her question.

"You're not hinting that something may have happened to Walter Crocker?"

"Yes, I am, Dad. Herman Crocker is a sinister character."

"In your imagination."

"In any one's imagination," Penny said firmly. "We know that Walter Crocker came here to collect money from Herman. That old man is a miser. What would be more natural than to have the nephew conveniently disappear?"

"Penny, you've been reading entirely too many wild stories."

"Dad, you are laughing at me!"

"Pardon me, but I can't help it," smiled the detective. "Herman Crocker is an eccentric char-

acter but I don't think he's quite as black as you paint him."

Before Penny could reply, Mrs. Masterbrook came to the porch.

"You're wanted on the 'phone," she told Mr. Nichols.

"Now what?" asked the detective, frowning. "I hope it's not Inspector Harris again."

He went into the house and was gone several minutes. Penny could hear him arguing with someone on the wire. Finally he returned to the porch.

"Well, I've done it now," he told her gloomily.

"What is wrong, Dad?"

"Oh, it was Inspector Harris again. There's been another robbery."

"Near here?" Penny asked quickly.

"Yes, about twenty miles away at a place called Benton. Unknown persons broke into the home of a wealthy family and made off with money and jewels valued at several thousand dollars."

"Why, that sounds almost like the other robbery case, Dad."

"Inspector Harris thinks that the same gang may have pulled both of them. He's after me to take the case."

"And you told him you would?"

"I finally agreed that I'd drive over to Benton and make an inspection. But unless the case is a particularly interesting one I'll have nothing of it. This was supposed to have been my vacation."

"Are you going to Benton now?" questioned Penny eagerly.

"Yes, I'll be back in a few hours."

"Take me with you, Dad," Penny pleaded.

"All right," the detective agreed, "but I don't care to be influenced by any of your wild theories as to who committed the robbery."

"I'll be as quiet as a mouse," Penny promised.

During the ride to Benton Mr. Nichols told her what little he had learned about the case.

"It was the James Kirmenbach home which was robbed," he revealed. "You may have heard of the man. He formerly was the head of the Kirmenbach Chemical Company but retired a few years ago to live quietly in the country. The thieves broke into

a wall safe, taking a box of money and jewels. The most valuable item was a diamond necklace."

"I suppose the local police made a routine investigation?"

"Yes, but they found no clues. Kirmenbach appealed to Inspector Harris and that's how I'm rung in on the deal."

It was a few minutes after nine o'clock when Mr. Nichols drew up in front of an imposing brick house at the outskirts of Benton.

Penny and her father presented themselves at the door and upon giving their names to the maid were promptly admitted. Mr. Kirmenbach, a bald headed man in his early sixties, came to greet the detective.

"Mr. Nichols?" he asked, extending his hand. "Inspector Harris telephoned that you would take the case."

"I only promised to make an inspection," the detective replied. "Tell me exactly what happened please."

"I'll call my wife," said Mr. Kirmenbach. "She'll be able to give you a better account than I."

While Penny and her father were waiting they glanced quickly about the living room. It was lavishly furnished and in excellent taste.

Mrs. Kirmenbach, a gray haired lady, only a few years younger than her husband, smiled graciously as she bowed to Penny and the detective.

"I do hope that you'll be able to recover my necklace for me," she said to Mr. Nichols. "The other things do not matter, but the diamonds were left me by my father years ago. I prized them for sentimental reasons as well as their actual value."

"When did you discover your loss?" questioned the detective.

"Early this morning Ellen, our maid, noticed that the window of the study had been pried open. She called me at once. The wall safe had been forced and my box of jewels was missing. My husband sent for the police at once."

"And they learned nothing," Mr. Kirmenbach said in a tone of disgust. "There were no fingermarks, no evidence of any kind."

"How many servants do you employ?" asked the detective.

"Only three," answered Mrs. Kirmenbach. "Ellen is the maid, and we have a colored woman who does the cooking. Jerry, a young college boy, serves as our chauffeur. I can vouch for them all."

"I'll talk with them later," Mr. Nichols said. "I'd like to look at the study now, please."

"This way," invited Mr. Kirmenbach. "I had the room locked up again after the police were here this morning. Nothing has been disturbed."

"Good," said Mr. Nichols. "I'll just look around for a few minutes."

"We'll leave you alone," Mrs. Kirmenbach declared politely. "If you want us for anything, we'll be in the living room."

"It will not take me long," replied the detective.

Penny glanced about the study with keen interest. It was a small paneled room, lined high with book shelves. There was a comfortable davenport, several chairs and a table.

Mr. Nichols first turned his attention to the wall safe. Next he carefully examined the window sill.

"Find anything, Dad?" asked Penny.

"Not yet," he answered.

As her father continued his inspection, Penny became a trifle bored. She sat down on the davenport and began idly to play with a toy lantern which had been dropped there. It was a child's toy such as one often saw in candy stores filled with sweets. The red isinglass had been broken in one place and the original string wick had been replaced by a tiny bit of cloth.

"Dad," said Penny presently, "do the Kirmenbachs have any children?"

"They didn't mention any," Mr. Nichols replied absently.

"They probably have grandchildren," Penny went on.

"Does it make any difference?" asked the detective. He was feeling irritated at his failure to find clues.

"Not particularly, Dad. I was just wondering about this toy lantern."

Mr. Nichols turned around and looked quickly at the object in her hand.

"Where did you get that?" he asked sharply.

"Why, it was right here on the davenport, Dad."

Mr. Nichols took the toy from her hand. Penny was surprised by the intent expression of his face as he examined the lantern.

"Come along, Penny," he said quietly, dropping it into his coat pocket. "We'll talk with Mr. and Mrs. Kirmenbach again. It's just possible that we've found a vital clue!"

CHAPTER IX

Herman Crocker's Visit

"YOU really believe this toy lantern has a connection with the jewel theft?" Penny asked in amazement. "And you say my theories are wild!"

"Wait until we have talked with the Kirmenbachs," replied Mr. Nichols tersely. "I may be on the wrong track but I think not."

Penny and her father found Mr. and Mrs. Kirmenbach awaiting them in the living room. The elderly couple had never seen the toy lantern before and scarcely could believe that the detective had picked it up in the study.

"It may have been dropped there by some child," Mr. Nichols remarked.

"But no child has been in the house in weeks," Mrs. Kirmenbach said quickly. "I can't understand it at all."

"May I speak with your servants now?" requested

the detective when the toy lantern had been fully discussed.

"Certainly," replied Mrs. Kirmenbach. "I will call them in."

In turn Mr. Nichols questioned the chauffeur, the cook, and the maid. When he displayed the toy lantern, Ellen's face lighted.

"Why, I saw that toy this morning when I first went into the study," she said. "It was lying on the floor. I picked it up so that no one would stumble over it and fall."

"You dropped it on the davenport?"

"Yes, sir."

"I'd like to have you show me exactly where you found the lantern."

"Certainly, sir."

The maid led Mr. Nichols back to the study and indicated a place not far from the wall safe.

"Mr. Nichols, you don't think that the toy was left by the jewel thieves?" Mr. Kirmenbach asked in amazement.

"Do you know of any other way the lantern happened to be in this room?"

"No."

"Then we will go upon the assumption that the toy lantern is a clue left by the thief—a very interesting clue."

"It seems unbelievable!" exclaimed Mr. Kirmenbach. "What would a jewel thief—a grown man be doing with a toy lantern?"

"It does appear a bit unusual," Mr. Nichols admitted, "but I feel certain there is a logical explanation."

"I have great faith in your ability, Mr. Nichols," said Mr. Kirmenbach. "However, I must say that I am unable to see where this clue will lead."

"At the moment I have no idea myself," replied the detective, smiling. "But I think that this may develop into something."

He declined to amplify his statement further, and a few minutes later left the house with Penny. They drove slowly back toward Knob Hill.

"Dad, I'm inclined to agree with Mr. Kirmenbach," Penny remarked. "I don't see what good that toy lantern will do you."

"First I'll have it examined for finger prints,"

the detective explained. "However, so many persons have handled it that I don't look for anything on that score. Next I'll get in touch with Inspector Harris and have him check on the manufacturers of toy lanterns. I'll try to find out who bought it."

"But there must be hundreds of toys just like this," Penny protested. "It doesn't have a single distinguishing feature."

"You're wrong there, Penny. Did you notice the wick?"

"Why, it was just an old piece of cloth."

"Exactly. When the old wick tore away, some ingenious child fashioned another from a piece of clothing."

"And you hope that it will be possible to trace the cloth?" Penny asked in amazement.

"That is what I shall try to do."

"You surely don't think that a child committed the robbery, Dad?"

"Hardly, Penny. But the thief may have a child of his own or a small brother. There is a slight chance that the lantern was left deliberately, but I rather doubt such a possibility."

Turning in at their own cottage, Penny and her father noticed a strange car standing by the picket fence.

"It looks as if we have a visitor," the detective observed.

Penny saw a man in a light overcoat standing by the porch talking with the housekeeper. As she and her father came up the walk, he turned to stare at them.

"This is Mr. Erwin Madden from Chicago," the housekeeper said. "He wishes to see you, Mr. Nichols."

"I hope I haven't kept you waiting," remarked the detective pleasantly.

"No, I arrived only a few minutes ago. May I talk with you?"

"Certainly," replied Mr. Nichols. He turned toward the housekeeper who was loitering in the doorway. "That will be all, Mrs. Masterbrook."

After the woman had gone, Mr. Nichols offered the visitor a chair on the porch. Penny started to go into the house but Mr. Madden indicated that it was unnecessary for her to leave.

"My business isn't of a confidential nature," he said pleasantly. "In fact, I am trying to broadcast my mission here in Kendon."

"If I had known that I should have invited our housekeeper to remain," smiled Mr. Nichols. "The town has few secrets unshared by her."

"I came here in search of my business partner, a man by the name of Jay Kline," the visitor went on. "He left Chicago some days ago, coming to Kendon to attend to a private business matter which did not concern the firm. He has not been heard from since."

"Indeed?" inquired Mr. Nichols politely. "You think that he has met with a mishap?"

"Yes, that is my belief," returned Mr. Madden gravely. "Mr. Kline gave me to understand that his mission here was a dangerous one. If something had not gone wrong I know I should have heard of him before this."

"Whom did your friend plan to visit here?"

"I don't know," the visitor admitted. "Mr. Kline was very secretive."

"Have you inquired for him in the village?"

"Yes, no one has heard of the man. It is all very bewildering."

"Are you actually sure that he came to Kendon?" inquired Mr. Nichols.

"I have no proof, but neither have I any reason for thinking that he would go elsewhere. I am convinced that my partner met with foul play."

"You wished to consult me professionally?" Mr. Nichols asked. He wondered who had sent the man to him.

"Professionally?" Mr. Madden questioned in a puzzled tone.

"I am a detective, you know," Mr. Nichols smiled. "On vacation at the present."

"Oh," murmured the visitor in surprise. "No, I wasn't aware of your calling. The grocery store man sent me to you. He told me that you had picked up a stranger in your car several nights ago, and I thought that by some chance the man might have been my missing partner."

"We did give a young man a lift to town," Mr. Nichols said. "But his name was Walter Crocker."

"Then I'll not trouble you further," said the

visitor, arising. "Thank you for your time."

He bowed to Penny and her father and drove away in his car.

"He was afraid to tell me any more about the case for fear I'd charge him a fee," chuckled Mr. Nichols. "Very likely by the time Mr. Madden gets back to Chicago his partner will be there too."

"Dad," said Penny thoughtfully, "maybe the man we picked up really was Jay Kline."

"What was that?" Mr. Nichols demanded.

"I said, perhaps the fellow who rode to town with us wasn't Walter Crocker at all but merely told us that name—"

"I can't keep up with your theories," Mr. Nichols laughed. "You have a new one every minute."

"That's because there are so many new developments, Dad. I wonder if it's too late to stop Mr. Madden?"

"He's a mile down the road by this time. And I'm glad of it because I don't want you to make yourself or me look ridiculous. What gave you the idea that Jay Kline and Walter Crocker are one and the same person?"

"I don't know," admitted Penny. "It just came to me all at once. Walter Crocker mysteriously disappeared—"

"You mean he went back to the city."

"We don't know that at all," Penny argued. "Did anyone except you and me see Walter Crocker? No! He went to talk with his uncle, Herman Crocker, and was seen no more. His automobile mysteriously appears in Crocker's barn—"

"Not so loud!" Mr. Nichols warned. "I think Mrs. Masterbrook is standing by the dining room door."

Penny subsided into hurt silence. She felt that her theories were logical and she did not like to have her father tease her.

"Well, anyway I didn't think up the toy lantern clue!" she muttered under her breath.

"That reminds me, I must telephone Inspector Harris," said Mr. Nichols. "I hope he thinks more of my theory than you do."

Penny could tell that her father was growing deeply interested in the Kirmenbach robbery case and following his talk with Inspector Harris, he

admitted that he had promised to do further work.

"It's likely to be a tough case," he told Penny the next morning. "Harris thinks we'll have no luck in tracing the toy lantern. I'm driving over to the Kirmenbach place again this morning."

"I believe I'll stay here this time," she replied.

Penny was glad that she elected to remain, for a short time after her father left, Herman Crocker drove into the yard. He greeted her in a more cordial tone than usual.

"Is everything all right here?" he asked.

"Oh, yes, we're getting along very well," Penny answered, glancing shrewdly at the old man. She felt certain that his real purpose in coming to the cottage was not to inquire for their comfort.

"Mrs. Masterbrook at home?" Mr. Crocker questioned casually.

"I saw her walking down toward the road a few minutes ago. Shall I call her?"

"No, I didn't want to see her anyway," he answered quickly. "Just thought I'd take a look around. I have some things stored up in the attic that I'd like to get."

"Just go right in," said Penny. She fell into step with him. "Oh, by the way, do you know Michael Haymond, our new hired man?"

"Never heard of him."

"I thought he might have been to see you."

"Why should he?" Herman Crocker demanded, looking at Penny suspiciously.

"I'm sure I don't know," she laughed uneasily.

When the man made no comment Penny waited a moment and then decided upon a bold attack.

"For some reason Michael reminds me of your nephew," she said. "I suppose he'll be coming back one of these days."

"Walter?" asked the old man gruffly. "I don't look for it."

"But won't he wish to get his car which is stored in your barn?" Penny asked with pretended innocence.

Herman Crocker's expression became guarded. The girl's words startled him but only a slight twitch of his eye muscles disclosed that he had been taken unawares.

"I suppose Walter will get the car sometime," he

answered slowly. "He told me he didn't have the money to pay a repair bill just now."

"You had it towed to your place for him?"

"That's right," replied Herman Crocker irritably. "Any more questions? If not I'll go on up to the attic."

"Oh, I'm sorry," said Penny apologetically.

She had intended to go along with the old man to the attic, but there was something about the look he gave her which made her change her mind. She was afraid she had made her questions too pointed. It would not do for Mr. Crocker to suspect her motives.

"I guess you know your way," she said evenly, opening the screen door for him.

"I ought to," snapped the old man. "I lived in this cottage for eight years."

He entered the house alone and Penny heard him tramping up the stairs to the attic.

"I wonder what he's doing up there?" she thought. "I'd give a lot to find out."

CHAPTER X

Searching the Loft

WHILE Penny stood listening to the sounds in the attic she saw Mrs. Masterbrook coming up the path to the cottage. The housekeeper paused by the gate to stare at Mr. Crocker's car and then glanced quickly about.

"What is Herman doing here?" she asked abruptly as Penny met her on the porch.

"I'm sure I don't know," replied the girl. "He said he wanted to get something from the attic."

"The attic!" repeated Mrs. Masterbrook. "Oh!" And for no apparent reason she began to laugh.

"What do you find so funny?"

"Oh, nothing," replied the housekeeper, passing quickly into the cottage.

Penny stared after the woman, thoroughly bewildered by her actions. She felt certain that Mrs. Masterbrook knew why old Herman Crocker had come to the cottage.

Penny sat down on the porch steps to wait. Fifteen minutes elapsed before she heard Mr. Crocker coming down the attic stairway. As he stepped out on the porch she noticed that he had nothing in his hands and he seemed somewhat disturbed.

"Did you find what you were after?" asked Penny.

"Oh, yes—yes," replied the old man absently.

Mrs. Masterbrook had emerged from the kitchen in time to hear the remark.

"Did you really?" she inquired with a slight smirk.

The words were spoken casually enough but Penny thought she detected a note of triumph in the woman's voice. Mr. Crocker noticed it too for he glanced sharply at the housekeeper. Her face was expressionless.

"Well, I'll have to be getting back," the old man said. He walked slowly to the car.

Mrs. Masterbrook waited on the porch until he had driven down the road. The housekeeper was highly pleased about something. Penny thought

that she looked exactly like a cat which had drunk its fill of rich cream.

"Mrs. Masterbrook knows what Herman came here for," the girl reflected. "I'd question her only it wouldn't do a bit of good."

Penny hoped that if she showed no interest the housekeeper might offer a little information. She was disappointed. Without a word Mrs. Masterbrook walked back into the cottage.

"I'd like to find out what is in the attic," Penny thought. "When the coast is clear I'm going up there and look around."

Throughout the morning she lingered near the cottage, but it seemed that always either the housekeeper or Michael Haymond was at hand to observe her actions. When Mr. Nichols returned from his walk Penny did not tell him about Herman Crocker's mysterious visit to the attic for she felt certain that he would not consider it mysterious at all. He was deeply absorbed in his own case and would sit for an hour at a time lost in thought.

"Are you worrying about toy lanterns, Dad?" Penny asked mischievously.

"That's right," he agreed with a smile. "I talked with Inspector Harris this morning from the village store. He's not progressing very well in tracing down the lantern clue. It seems there are dozens of companies which manufacture toys exactly like the one you found at Kirmenbach's place."

"Then you've reached a dead end?" asked Penny.

"For the time being, yes. But I've not given up. I still believe that it may be possible to trace the thief by means of the clue. After all, the toy lantern had one distinguishing feature—the cloth wick."

"It's too bad all this had to come up on your vacation," Penny said sympathetically. She could see that the lines of worry had returned to her father's face.

"I wish I had kept out of the case," he returned. "But now that I'm in it, I'll have no peace of mind until it's solved. There's something about that toy lantern clue which challenges me!"

"I feel the same way regarding Herman Crocker," Penny nodded.

"What was that?" Mr. Nichols looked up quickly.

"I meant that our landlord's queer personality fascinates me. He's always doing such strange things."

"Let me see," Mr. Nichols said jokingly. "How many queer characters have you discovered since we came here?"

"Only three, Dad. Mrs. Masterbrook, Michael and old Herman. Unless you count Walter Crocker and Mr. Madden."

"How about the postman? I noticed you were talking with him yesterday."

"Purely upon a matter of business," Penny laughed. "His name isn't down on my list of suspects yet."

She said no more for just then Michael Haymond came up the path with an armful of wood.

After carrying it to the kitchen he returned to the porch. Mr. Nichols motioned him into a rocker.

"I'm afraid I'm not doing very much to earn my wages," the young man said apologetically. "My chief occupation around here seems to be eating and sitting."

"I'm well satisfied," replied the detective.

Although Penny had thought that her father was unwise to hire Michael she liked the young man a great deal. He was quiet, unassuming, and did his tasks willingly. Whenever he had a spare moment he usually spent it with a book. Penny had read the titles with surprise. Michael devoted himself to volumes of philosophy and history and he studied textbooks of mathematics and French.

"Rather deep stuff," Mr. Nichols had commented, looking at one of the philosophy volumes.

"I never had a chance to attend college, sir," Michael had replied, flushing. "I'm trying to educate myself a little."

During the afternoon both Mr. Nichols and Michael absented themselves from the cottage. Mrs. Masterbrook decided that she would walk down to the village. Penny was delighted to be left alone in the house.

The moment that everyone was gone she hastened to the attic. It was a low-ceiling room, dimly lighted by two gable windows. Dust and cobwebs were everywhere.

The attic contained an old chest of drawers, the footboards of a bed, two trunks, a chair with a broken leg, and several boxes of dishes.

As Penny's gaze roved over the objects she observed that a faint scratch on the floor showed where the trunks had been recently moved. Some of the dust had been brushed off from the lids.

"Herman must have been looking at the trunks," the girl thought. "I wonder what he expected to find?"

She lifted the lid of the nearest one and was pleased that it was unlocked. There was nothing in the top tray but beneath it she found old fashioned clothing which had belonged to a woman. The garments had been very carefully packed in moth balls.

Penny opened the second trunk. It too was filled with clothing in a style worn some fifteen years before. In the bottom she came upon an old picture album and a packet of letters. All were addressed to Herman Crocker and appeared to be of a business nature.

Penny was tempted to read the letters, but she

put aside the thought. After all it was not very honorable of her to pry into Mr. Crocker's personal affairs without a stronger motive than curiosity.

"If there is any occasion for learning more about the man, I can read the letters later," Penny reflected. "Dad would be ashamed of me if he knew what I was doing."

She replaced the packet in the trunk and closed down the lid. Then after making certain that the chest of drawers contained nothing of interest, she hastened down stairs again and washed the grime from her hands.

Later in the afternoon Mrs. Masterbrook came back from Kendon and it seemed to Penny that she was more subdued than usual. Even Mr. Nichols noticed a change in the woman.

"I wonder what is the matter with her?" he remarked. "She seems to be losing her fire!"

"I guess she's just tired from the long walk to town," Penny replied. However, she watched Mrs. Masterbrook closely, and was inclined to agree that something had gone amiss. The housekeeper looked worried.

"Aren't you feeling well, Mrs. Masterbrook?" she inquired kindly.

"Of course I'm feeling well," the woman snapped.

After supper that night Michael Haymond left the house, but Penny did not know whether or not he went to call upon Herman Crocker. She went to bed about ten, and heard the young man return to the cottage shortly after that hour. By eleven o'clock everyone had gone to bed.

Penny went off to sleep soon after her head touched the pillow. It was hours later that she awoke to hear the kitchen clock chiming three o'clock.

In the hallway a board creaked.

Penny sat up and listened. She was certain that someone was tiptoeing down the hall. For a moment she was frightened. Then she crept out of bed and flung open the door.

At the end of the hall she saw the figure of a man. He fled before she could speak or make an outcry. Penny heard the outside door slam shut. She hurried to a window and was in time to see

someone running swiftly toward the woods.

"Dad!" she screamed excitedly. "Wake up! Wake up!" And to emphasize her words, Penny ran to her father's bedroom and pounded on the door with her clenched fist.

CHAPTER XI

Aid from Michael

"WHAT'S the matter, Penny?" cried Mr. Nichols as he opened the door of his room. "Are you having nightmares?"

"Dad, someone broke into the cottage!" she told him tensely. "When I stepped out into the hall he ran away. I saw him disappear into the woods."

By this time the detective was thoroughly awake.

"Are you sure, Penny?"

"Of course I am! I didn't imagine it this time and it wasn't someone after a drink either!"

"Let me get dressed," said her father. "Then I'll look around."

Penny ran back to her own room. She was amazed that Mrs. Masterbrook and Michael had not been aroused. In the next room she could hear the housekeeper snoring contentedly. There seemed no reason to awaken her.

Penny quickly dressed and was ready first.

"We'll take a look around the place," Mr. Nichols said, "but it's probably too late to catch the prowler."

"Yes, he'll be a long way from here by this time," Penny agreed.

Armed with a flashlight, they slipped outside and after making a tour of the house walked as far as the edge of the timber. They found no one.

"It's no use going on," the detective declared. "We'd never catch the fellow now. He may have been a tramp who noticed that our door was unlocked."

"I wonder if Michael Haymond is in his room?" Penny asked abruptly.

"Why wouldn't he be?"

"It seems odd he didn't awaken with me screaming all over the place."

"Mrs. Masterbrook slept through it," Mr. Nichols replied.

"Just the same I'm curious to know if Michael is in his room. Dad, why don't you——"

"Penny, I'll not do it," the detective interrupted. "I like that young man and I'm not going to barge

into his room in the middle of the night and ask him a lot of stupid questions."

"All right," Penny returned with a sigh. "But how easy it would be just to peep in the door and see if he's there."

"I'll not do that either," replied Mr. Nichols. "You may have been mistaken about the prowler. You've taken such an imaginative turn this summer."

"Thanks, Dad," Penny drawled. She added mischievously: "Let me know when you've found the owner of the toy lantern."

"There's good common sense behind my theory," said Mr. Nichols seriously. "Inspector Harris seems to think I'm on the wrong track but I have a hunch——"

"In that case you should be generous with your daughter," Penny laughed. "She has a hunch too."

"We'll call a truce," Mr. Nichols smiled. "You're free to trace down all the mystery you can find at Kendon providing that you don't ask me to discharge Michael."

"Seriously, Dad, I think something is going on

here that would bear investigation," Penny said soberly. "I'd like to delve into it but I need a sympathetic helper."

"I'm sorry, Penny, but I haven't time to play around."

"I didn't mean you at all, Dad," Penny laughed. "I was thinking about Susan Altman. Would you mind if I invited her down here for a few days?"

"Go ahead if you like. She'll be company for you while I'm working on the Kirmenbach case."

"I'll send a letter right away," Penny declared eagerly.

The next morning after writing to her friend she walked down to the village to post the letter. Dropping in at the grocery store for a loaf of bread she deliberately drew the genial owner into conversation, seeking information regarding Herman Crocker.

"I feel rather sorry for him," she remarked. "I'm sure that he hasn't enough money to feed himself and his grandson properly."

"Don't you worry about that," replied the storekeeper with a quick laugh. "Old Herman has more

money than anyone in this town. He inherited plenty when his sister Jennie died in the East. Herman was her only heir, and when he dies the money probably will go to his grandson, Perry."

"Doesn't Mr. Crocker have any other living relatives?" Penny questioned. She was thinking of Walter Crocker.

"Not to my knowledge," answered the storekeeper. "The Crocker family has just about died out."

Penny paid for the bread and walked slowly back toward the cottage. She glanced curiously at the Crocker homestead as she passed it, but as usual the blinds were drawn and the place seemed deserted.

"How unhappy Perry must be there," she thought. "He should go to school and have playmates his own age. I can't see why someone doesn't take an interest in his welfare."

During the next two days Penny found time heavy upon her hands. Mr. Nichols frequently was absent from the cottage and Mrs. Masterbrook and Michael proved very poor company. The housekeeper talked entirely too much about nothing

while Michael scarcely spoke a word unless Penny asked him a direct question.

On the afternoon of the second day, for want of another occupation, Penny wandered up to the attic to look around once more.

"If I really mean to learn anything about Herman Crocker I'll have to examine those letters," she reflected. "I don't know whether to do it or not."

Penny opened the trunk and noticed that the layer of clothing had been disturbed. She did not remember having left the garments so carelessly. She refolded the clothes and then felt down in the bottom of the trunk for the packet of letters. It did not seem to be there.

Not until Penny had removed all the clothing piece by piece could she realize that the letters were gone. The only papers remaining in the trunk were old receipts for bills paid. Many of them were stamped tax statements.

"Someone has taken the letters," she told herself. "How foolish I was not to examine them when I had a chance."

Penny could only speculate upon what had become of the missing packet. She did not believe that Herman Crocker had taken the letters, for to her knowledge he had not returned to the cottage since his first visit. It was possible that the night prowler had opened the trunk, but a more likely supposition seemed to be that Mrs. Masterbrook had decided to get more "inside information."

"That woman is a natural born snooper," the girl thought. "She knew that Herman Crocker was up here in the attic too, so it's quite possible she took the letters after he went away."

Although she was disappointed, Penny did not believe that the missing letters had contained anything of vital significance. It was logical to assume that had they served as damaging evidence against Herman Crocker, the man would have destroyed them upon his visit to the attic.

As Penny was reflecting upon the problem, the stairway door opened and Mrs. Masterbrook called her name.

"There's someone here to see you!" the housekeeper reported.

Penny was annoyed at having been caught in the attic. She had not known that Mrs. Masterbrook was anywhere about the premises. It was just another proof that nothing seemed to escape the vigilant eye of the woman.

"I'll be there in a minute," Penny said.

She closed the lid of the trunk, wiped her dusty hands and went quickly down the stairs. Reaching the front door, she gave a cry of amazed delight.

"Susan Altman!"

"I thought you'd be surprised," laughed the other girl, as Penny gave her a welcome hug. "When your letter arrived I didn't stop to debate. I just jumped on the train and came."

"I'm tickled pink!" Penny declared slangily. "When you didn't write, I had started to believe you weren't coming. But why did you walk from town? Why didn't you telephone?"

"I didn't know you had one."

"Oh, yes, we have all the modern conveniences," laughed Penny. "You must be dead tired. Come on in."

"I'm not a bit tired," Susan insisted, "but I'd

like to wash a few of the cinders out of my eyes. Such a dirty old train."

"Let me take your suitcase," cried Penny.

The girls went inside and while Susan freshened herself from the journey, they talked as fast as they could.

"What's all this mystery you wrote me about?" Susan asked in an undertone. "Who is Mrs. Masterbrook, and where is that old house you mentioned?"

"You'll hear all about it," Penny promised eagerly. "But let's wait until we're away from the cottage."

"Even the walls have ears?" laughed Susan.

"No, but our housekeeper has," Penny replied.

The girls soon left the cottage, walking down by the ravine where they would be alone. Penny told her chum everything that had happened since she and her father had arrived at Kendon. Susan did not feel that her friend had placed an imaginative interpretation upon any of the events.

"I'm glad you're in sympathy with me," Penny laughed. "I'm hoping that together we may be able to help little Perry Crocker. And incidentally, we

might stumble into a mystery which would rival Dad's toy lantern case."

"You know I want to help," said Susan eagerly. "But I'm an awful dub. I never have any ideas."

"I'm a little short of them myself just now," Penny admitted. "But first we'll go down to the Crocker place. I'm anxious for you to meet the main characters of our melodrama."

"I think I noticed the house on the way up the hill," Susan replied. "Is it that ancient, vine-covered mansion?"

"Yes, Mrs. Masterbrook told me Old Herman moved in there after his sister died. He used to live in this cottage."

"And where is this young man named Michael Haymond?"

"I don't know what became of him," Penny admitted. "He should be somewhere around."

"Is he good looking?"

"You would ask that," teased Penny. "No, Michael isn't handsome, but he's nice."

"You said in your letter that you thought he might be a crook——"

"Well, he acted mysteriously at first," Penny said defensively. "But after you get to know him, he seems like anyone else, only he's very reserved."

"Perhaps Mr. Crocker will turn out that way."

"I don't think so," Penny smiled. "He's really an eccentric character. Do you mind walking down Knob Hill?"

"Not at all. I need a little exercise."

The distance between the cottage and Mr. Crocker's house was only a quarter of a mile. Penny intended to use as a pretext for calling upon the old man that she wished to buy more eggs. However, as the girls drew near the mansion they saw Mr. Crocker's car coming down the lane.

"There goes Herman now!" Penny exclaimed. "And Perry is with him."

The car reached the end of the lane and turned down the main road toward Kendon.

"Well, it looks as if I'll not get to meet the old gentleman after all," commented Susan.

"No, but this will be a good time to see the house at close range. With Mr. Crocker away, we can look around as much as we please."

As the girls walked on up the lane Penny told Susan about the automobile which she had seen parked in Mr. Crocker's barn.

"What do you think became of the owner?" asked Susan. "You're not intimating that Walter Crocker never went back to the city?"

"I've asked myself that question a great many times. I know that Mr. Crocker's nephew came here to claim an inheritance, yet the people of Kendon are under the impression that Old Herman has no living relatives except Perry."

"You're making a very serious accusation against Mr. Crocker."

"Oh, I'm not saying that he had anything to do with his nephew's disappearance," Penny said quickly. "I'm just speculating about it. For that matter, I'd not tell anyone else my thoughts."

"It wouldn't be wise——" Susan began.

Her words ended in a gasp of alarm for at that moment Mr. Crocker's hound came around the corner of the house. Both girls stopped short.

"Rudy is vicious!" Penny warned. "And he's been left unchained."

"Let's get away from here."

The girls turned and started hurriedly back down the lane, but the hound had made up his mind that they were intruders. With a low growl he leaped toward them.

"Run!" cried Susan in terror.

Instead of fleeing, Penny stooped to snatch up a stick. Rudy sprang at her, and the force of his powerful body knocked her to the ground. Susan screamed in terror.

Help was closer at hand than either of the girls suspected. A man had been crouching behind the hedge. As Penny struggled to regain her feet, he came running toward her. It was Michael Haymond.

CHAPTER XII

The Matron's Story

"STAY where you are!" commanded the young man sternly.

He seized the stick from Penny's hand and used it to beat off the dog. Rudy showed very little fight. When he felt the sting of the switch he ran off whining toward the barn.

Penny picked herself up and dusted off her linen dress.

"Thank you, Michael," she said soberly.

"It wasn't anything," the young man replied. "The dog is mostly bluff."

"He bluffs too realistically to suit me," Penny returned ruefully.

"You're not hurt?"

"No, the dog knocked me over but his teeth missed me. I'm glad you happened to be here at the right time, Michael."

"So am I."

The young man glanced quickly at Penny and then looked away. He seemed to realize that she was expecting him to offer an explanation for his presence at the Crocker place.

The thought had occurred to Penny, but in view of the service which Michael had rendered, she decided not to question him. Instead she graciously introduced the young man to Susan.

"Since Mr. Crocker isn't at home we may as well be walking back to the cottage," Penny remarked after the three had chatted for a moment. "Rudy may muster his courage and take after me again."

"I'll go along with you," said Michael falling into step with the girls. "I came to see Herman Crocker too."

Neither Penny nor Susan offered any comment. They were quite sure that the young man had been crouching behind the hedge. They believed that he had observed Mr. Crocker drive away, and they thought that probably he had been watching their own movements.

During the walk back to the cottage, the girls chatted pleasantly with Michael. Susan, unaware

that the young man had been uncommunicative regarding his past history, began to ask him casual questions about his home town.

"You were born in the west, Penny tells me," she commented.

"That's right," the young man agreed uneasily.

"I'd never have suspected it," Susan went on. "You don't talk like a westerner. Did you live on a ranch?"

Michael shook his head. He hesitated and then said in a low tone:

"I spent most of my early life in an orphan's home. It was a place called Glenhaven."

"Why, there's a Home in this state by that name!" cried Penny.

"Well, that's certainly odd," replied Michael, avoiding her gaze. "But I suppose Glenhaven is a common name."

"Tell us more about yourself," urged Susan.

"There's nothing to tell. I don't know very much about my parents. I was just turned over to the Home until I was eighteen years of age. I worked hard there but I was well treated. Then I left and

got a job in a factory, but times turned hard and I was laid off. That about brings me up to date."

Penny thought: "But it doesn't explain why you came to Kendon to see Herman Crocker." However, her serene countenance gave no hint that she doubted any of Michael's story.

Alone in Penny's bedroom, the girls discussed the young man.

"I like him a great deal," said Susan.

"And so do I," Penny agreed, "but that doesn't alter facts. I feel certain he's not telling us a straightforward story. He may have been born in the west but I believe he's spent a great deal of his life right here in this state."

"What makes you think so, Penny?"

"Because in talking with him I've noticed that he's always well versed in local history and state politics. And another thing—I doubt that Glenhaven is a common name for an orphan's home."

"He did act embarrassed about that."

"Do you want to know what I think?" asked Penny earnestly. "I suspect Michael Haymond spent most of his life in the Glenhaven Home

which is in this state—not out west."

"But why should he try to hide the fact?"

"I couldn't guess. It's remotely possible he's been mixed up in trouble, but Michael seems like a decent sort."

"If we were really prying we could write to the Glenhaven officials," Susan said slowly.

"I don't consider it prying to try to find out more about the man," returned Penny. "A good detective always investigates every angle of a case. I could send a letter off tonight only it will take so long to get a reply."

"A week at best, I'd judge."

"Glenhaven isn't far from here!" Penny cried. "Let's drive over there tomorrow. I think Dad would let me have the car if he doesn't need it himself."

"Why, I'd enjoy the trip," Susan declared promptly.

"We could start early and take our lunch," Penny planned enthusiastically.

When Mr. Nichols came home she asked him if they might use the car the following day. The

detective readily agreed. He was delighted that Susan had arrived to visit Penny for he felt that the girls would have an enjoyable time together.

"Any news about your toy lantern?" Penny asked her father teasingly.

"None worth mentioning," the detective replied. "I'm getting a little discouraged."

"Don't hesitate to call upon me if you need my sleuthing services," Penny laughed. "I'm doing very well with my own case."

Early the next morning Penny and Susan set off for Glenhaven, telling no one save Mr. Nichols of their destination. They did not wish either Mrs. Masterbrook or Michael to gain an inkling of their mission.

Noon found the girls within view of the orphan's home. It was a private institution and from the outside at least, a pleasant looking place. The brick building had several long wings and there was a wide expanse of bent grass lawn.

"Did you ever see such a beautiful yard?" asked Susan admiringly. "It looks as smooth as a floor."

"It's almost too pretty," said Penny. "I'd rather

see the grass worn thin in places. Then I'd know that children had been playing on it instead of being cooped up inside."

The girls turned in at the grounds and drove up to the front door. Upon asking to see the matron they were shown into Mrs. Barker's office.

"What may I do for you?" the woman inquired pleasantly.

Under her intent scrutiny, Penny found it difficult to state her mission. She managed to say that she was trying to learn if an orphan named Michael Haymond had ever lived at the Home.

"One moment and I will see," replied the matron.

She rang a bell and instructed an attendant to check over the institution records. In a short while the report came back. No person by the name of Michael Haymond had ever resided at the Glenhaven Home.

"It's barely possible the young man took the name of Haymond after leaving the institution," Penny said slowly. "I wonder if you would recognize him by description?"

"How long has he been away?" questioned the matron.

"I am only guessing but I should say at least two years."

"Then I'd not remember him. You see I took charge of the Glenhaven Home only nine months ago. The person for you to see is Mrs. Havers. She was matron here for over twenty years."

"Do you know where I could find her?" inquired Penny.

"I will give you her address." Mrs. Barker reached for pencil and paper.

"Does she live close by?" Penny asked.

"Yes, only a short distance away in the town of Ferndale. Mrs. Havers left her duties here upon account of serious illness, but I understand she is considerably improved now."

Penny thanked the matron and accepting the slip of paper, left the institution in company with Susan. Outside the building the girls paused to consider their next move.

"It shouldn't take us long to find Mrs. Havers," Penny declared. "Let's go to her place."

"All right, we have plenty of time," Susan agreed. "Only it looks useless because if Michael had ever lived here his name would have been on the records."

"Yes, unless he changed his name," Penny admitted, "but let's go anyway."

The girls drove on to the town of Ferndale and had little difficulty in locating the address given them by Mrs. Barker. They were admitted to an overly heated brick cottage by an elderly woman with white hair and kind gray eyes. The living room was so warm and stuffy that Penny had trouble in breathing but Mrs. Havers apparently did not notice.

"You wish to see me concerning a former inmate of the Glenhaven Home?" the old lady asked after Penny and Susan had stated their mission. "I'll be glad to answer any of your questions."

"We are trying to trace a young man by the name of Michael Haymond," Penny explained. "Would you remember him?"

"I have never forgotten a single child who was ever placed under my care," replied Mrs. Havers

with a smile. "But I am certain that no one by that name ever lived at the Home."

"Then I am afraid we were mistaken in our facts," Penny said in disappointment.

"You are sure you have the right name?"

"Why, I think so," Penny replied doubtfully.

"The reason I ask is that we did have an orphan by the name of Michael in our institution," Mrs. Havers declared reflectively. "He was one of my favorites. There was some mystery about his parentage, but he seemed to come from a good family."

"Do you recall his full name?" Penny questioned.

"Oh, yes, it was Michael Gladwin."

"That sounds a trifle like Haymond," Susan commented.

"Michael was brought to the institution when he was two years old," Mrs. Havers recalled. "His parents had been killed in an auto accident we were told, but while the facts were officially recorded, I always doubted the story."

"May I ask why you doubted it?" Penny inquired.

"I consider myself a fairly good judge of character," Mrs. Havers replied. "The man who brought Michael to our home was a very peculiar person. He claimed to be no relation to the boy, yet he had taken a deep liking to him and was willing to pay for his keep at the institution."

"That would seem very generous," Penny remarked.

"So I thought. From his appearance, one would never suspect that the man had such a character."

"Didn't you investigate him?" asked Susan.

"It is not the policy of the Glenhaven Home to probe deeply into the parentage of the children placed there," Mrs. Havers replied. "Babies left on our doorstep receive the same treatment as those brought by parents unable to keep their offsprings. In this case, the man paid Michael's way for five years in advance."

"After that I suppose you never heard from him again?" Penny inquired.

"To the contrary, money came regularly for ten years. However, during that period, no one ever visited the boy."

"Can you tell us the name of the person who brought Michael to the Home?" Penny questioned.

"It has slipped my mind for the moment. Let me see—the name began with a K. It seems to me it was Keenan or very similar. The money always came from a place by the name of Fairfax."

"What became of Michael?" inquired Susan curiously.

"He lived at the Home until he was eighteen years of age," Mrs. Havers answered. "Then we found a position for him. After that our record ceases."

"Did you never make any attempt to trace the boy's parentage?" Penny asked thoughtfully.

"Yes, a number of years ago I wrote to Fairfax. It was a strange thing—the letter was never answered. And from that day, funds ceased to come for Michael's support."

"It appeared as if the man who had been paying for the boy's keep feared an investigation," Penny commented.

"Yes, that is what I thought. I would have probed deeper into the matter but at that time I was taken

ill. I went to a hospital for over a year, then I resumed my duties, only to give them up again a few months ago."

Mrs. Havers began to talk of her own ailments and the girls had little opportunity to ask additional questions about Michael.

"I am sorry that I've not been able to help you," the woman said regretfully as she escorted the girls to the door. "Of course the Michael of my story has no connection with the young man you are trying to trace."

"Probably not," Penny agreed. "Thank you for giving us so much of your time."

When the door had closed behind them, she turned eagerly to her chum.

"Susan, I didn't like to say so in front of Mrs. Havers, but why couldn't Michael Haymond and Michael Gladwin be the same person?"

"Michael is a common name."

"Yes, but many of the facts in Michael Haymond's life dovetail with those told us by Mrs. Havers."

"There may be a slight similarity," Susan ac-

knowledged. "But we can never prove anything."

Penny stared at her chum for an instant. Then her face relaxed into a broad smile.

"Susan, I have a dandy idea!" she cried. "Fairfax isn't far from here. Let's drive there right now and see if we can't locate that mysterious Mr. Keenan!"

CHAPTER XIII

A Bolt of Cloth

SUSAN instantly approved of Penny's idea, so the girls drove on toward Fairfax, a small city of several thousand inhabitants. They stopped at a corner drugstore to consult a telephone directory. At least fifteen families by the name of Keenan were listed.

"This isn't going to be as easy as I thought," Penny said in disappointment.

"I suppose we could telephone every Keenan in the book," Susan ventured.

"What could we say?" Penny asked. "'I beg your pardon, but are you the person who took Michael Gladwin to the Orphan's Home?' We'd receive nothing but rebuffs."

"I guess it would be silly," Susan agreed. "Let's give it up."

"We might try the postoffice," Penny said after a moment's thought.

They located the government building in the downtown section of Fairfax only to meet disappointment once more. The postmaster listened politely enough while Penny told him that she was seeking a certain Mr. Keenan who for many years had regularly mailed letters to the Glenhaven Orphan's Home, but she could tell that he considered her request for information rather ridiculous.

"We handle hundreds of letters a day here," he explained. "It would be impossible for me to remember any particular one."

Penny and Susan went back to the car, convinced that they could do no more.

"We may as well go home," Penny declared gloomily. "Our day has been wasted."

"Oh, I'd not say that," replied Susan cheerfully. "We've had an interesting time, and we learned quite a few facts from Mrs. Havers."

"We don't know a bit more about Michael Haymond than we did before. He may be the same person as Michael Gladwin but we'll never be able to prove it."

"Not unless he breaks down and admits it, I fear."

"I'd not want Michael to think I was prying into his past life," Penny said hastily. "After all, it's really none of my affair where he spent his early years. I'll just forget about it."

The girls might have been unable to dismiss the affair completely from their minds had it not been that the following day another development crowded all else into the background.

Susan had started to knit a sweater. Finding that she was in need of more wool, she asked Penny to walk down to the village dry goods store with her.

While Susan was trying to match her sample, Penny roved about the store, gazing at the various objects. She had never seen such a strange mixture in any one establishment before. There was a grocery section, a candy department, one devoted to books and stationery, a shoe section, and sundry articles too numerous to mention.

Suddenly Penny's attention was drawn to a bolt of cloth lying on the counter. It was white material

of a curious weave. The girl crossed over to examine it.

"Are you thinking of buying yourself a dress, Penny?" asked Susan. She had come up behind her chum.

"Oh! You startled me!" exclaimed Penny with a little laugh. "Susan, I wish you'd look at this cloth!"

"I don't like it at all if you want my honest opinion," replied Susan. "The material is too coarse."

"I don't intend to buy it for a dress," Penny explained quickly, lowering her voice. "Do you remember that broken toy lantern which I showed you?"

"Of course I do. You mean the one which your father believes to be a clue in the Kirmenbach case?"

"Yes."

"I still don't understand what you are driving at," Susan said a trifle impatiently. "What connection does it have with this bolt of dress goods?"

"Look at the cloth very closely," Penny urged. "Now don't you see?"

"No, I don't."

"Have you forgotten the wick of the toy lantern?"

"The wick——" repeated Susan slowly. "Oh! The cloth is the same!"

"It's the very same weave," Penny nodded. "At least that would be my guess. The wick of that toy lantern might have been made from a scrap of cloth sold from this very bolt of goods!"

"I'd never have noticed a thing like that in a million years," Susan murmured in awe. "Penny, you've uncovered an important clue in your father's case."

"I may be wrong about it," Penny admitted.

She lowered her voice for the storekeeper was coming toward the girls.

"May I show you something in yard goods?" he inquired. "That bolt on the counter is one of our popular pieces."

"Have you sold very much of it?" Penny asked quickly.

"Oh, yes, indeed. A great many women in Kendon have had suits made from this particular pat-

tern. It is very reasonably priced too—only thirty-nine cents a yard."

"Could you give me a list of the persons who have bought material from this bolt?" Penny questioned eagerly.

The storekeeper regarded her rather blankly for the request was a strange one.

"Well, no, I'm afraid I can't," he replied. "Half the women in town buy yard goods from me. But I'm sure you can't go wrong in making this selection."

"I'll take a quarter of a yard," Penny told him.

"Only a quarter of a yard?"

"Yes, that will do for a sample. I may want more later on."

The storekeeper cut off the material and wrapped it up. Penny and Susan left the store with their purchases.

"I'm going straight back to the cottage and compare this cloth with the wick of the toy lantern!" Penny exclaimed when they were beyond the storekeeper's hearing.

"It's a pity so many persons bought the material,"

Susan commented. "Otherwise it might be possible to trace the buyers."

"Yes," agreed Penny, "but the clue may prove to be a valuable one anyway. If this cloth is the same as the toy lantern wick, it's very possible that the thief who stole the Kirmenbach jewels lives right in this town."

"Aren't you forgetting that other stores may have the same kind of material for sale," Susan remarked.

"That's possible of course. Oh, Dad may not consider the clue of much value, but at least it's worth reporting."

Mr. Nichols was sitting on the front porch when the girls reached the cottage. Making certain that Mrs. Masterbrook was not within hearing, Penny told him of her important discovery in the village. Mr. Nichols examined the cloth very closely and then compared it with the wick of the toy lantern.

"The material looks exactly the same to me, Dad!" Penny declared excitedly.

"It is identical," her father agreed. "Where did you say you bought the goods?"

"At Hunters Store. Unfortunately, every woman in Kendon seems to have bought this same material."

Mr. Nichols reached for his hat. "I'm going down there now and talk with the storekeeper," he declared.

"Then you think the clue is important, Dad."

"Yes, I do, Penny. It may not lead to anything, but one can never be sure."

"Didn't I tell you to call on me if you needed help with the case?" laughed Penny.

"You certainly did," her father agreed good-naturedly. "As a detective I'm afraid you're showing me up in a bad light."

Before leaving the cottage Mr. Nichols was careful to lock the toy lantern in his room. Considering its value in the Kirmenbach case he did not wish to run any risk of having it stolen.

Mr. Nichols was absent from the cottage a little over an hour. When Penny saw him coming up the road she ran to meet him.

"Did you learn anything, Dad?" she asked eagerly.

The detective shook his head.

"I'm satisfied that the material is the same," he replied, "but the storekeeper couldn't remember anyone who had bought the goods from him. He seems to be a stupid fellow."

Penny walked along with her father for some distance without making any response. Then she said half apologetically:

"Dad, I have an idea, but I suppose it's a very silly one."

"What is it, Penny?" the detective asked soberly.

"I have a theory that the thief who took the Kirmenbach jewels may have been some person living in this locality."

"That is possible," Mr. Nichols agreed.

"In that case the toy lantern probably belonged to some child who may reside in or near Kendon."

"True."

"This is my idea," Penny explained. "Why not display the lantern in some prominent place where children will be likely to see it—for instance the candy department of Hunter's store. Take Mr. Hunter into your confidence and have him on the

lookout for the original owner of the toy lantern. A child seeing it on the store shelf would be almost certain to identify the property as his."

Mr. Nichols did not laugh. Instead he remained thoughtfully silent for a moment.

"There may be something in your idea, Penny," he said gravely. "If we could locate the owner of the toy lantern it should prove fairly easy to trace the thief. But the chance that the right child would enter the store and recognize the toy is a very slim one."

"Would it do any harm to try?"

"No, we've nothing to lose," Mr. Nichols declared. "I've tried all the sensible ways of tracing the thief, and have met with no success. We may as well test out your theory."

"When will you see Mr. Hunter?" Penny asked eagerly.

"We'll get the toy lantern and go right back there together," Mr. Nichols promised. He smiled down at his daughter. "And by the way, there's a new development in the Kirmenbach case which I forgot to mention."

"What is that, Dad?"

"Mr. Kirmenbach has offered a five hundred dollar reward for the capture of the jewel thief. So you see, if your idea should lead to anything, it will prove a very profitable one."

CHAPTER XIV

A Conversation Overheard

PENNY had scant hope that ever she would win the reward offered by Mr. Kirmenbach. She knew as well as did her father that there was not one chance in fifty that her unique plan would bring results.

Mr. Hunter, upon being taken into the detective's confidence, was very willing to cooperate. He placed the broken toy lantern on a prominent shelf near the candy counter and promised to report at once if any child appeared to claim the trinket.

Susan and Penny fell into the habit of dropping into the store whenever they were in the village. They saw many children come to buy candy and all-day-suckers, but days passed and no child took the slightest interest in the broken lantern.

"I'm afraid it was just another dud idea," Penny admitted ruefully.

"You are entirely too impatient," said her

father. "Cases aren't solved in a week. The idea hasn't been thoroughly tested yet."

"I've lost confidence in it," Penny declared.

"It was a long shot at best," returned Mr. Nichols. "However, we'll leave the toy lantern at Mr. Hunter's store for another week at least."

Temporarily losing interest in her father's case, Penny remembered that as yet Susan had never met old Herman Crocker.

"We might go back there this afternoon," she suggested.

"I don't care for Mr. Crocker's dog," Susan said uneasily. "Michael may not be around to help us out of trouble again."

"Oh, we can be careful," Penny replied. "Anyway, I think that Rudy is mostly bluff. I doubt he would bite."

"I notice you had a different opinion when he was coming at you!" teased Susan. "But if you're brave enough to go I suppose I'll tag along even if we do get bit."

"I have a great curiosity to learn if Walter Crocker's car is still in the barn," Penny confessed.

"Somehow I keep feeling that there's some mystery about that fellow's disappearance."

"If the dog is around we'll probably never get within a mile of the barn. But come on! You'll never be satisfied until we're chewed to bits."

The girls did not choose their usual route which led along the road. Instead they cut through the woods, intending to approach Mr. Crocker's place from the direction of the barn.

When Susan and Penny emerged from the trees they were on Mr. Crocker's farm. They could see two men standing by the barn.

"There is Herman Crocker now!" exclaimed Penny as they halted. "But who is with him?"

"It looks a little like Michael Haymond," said Susan.

"It's not Michael," Penny corrected. "Why, I do believe it's Walter Crocker!"

"Old Herman's nephew!"

"Yes, I'm sure it is he."

"But Penny, you said he disappeared," Susan protested. "You thought Old Herman was responsible——"

"It seems I was wrong," Penny admitted ruefully. "I may have misjudged Herman Crocker completely. I thought he was an unscrupulous person, but it doesn't look so much like it now."

"They're having some sort of argument," Susan observed. "I wish we could hear what they're saying."

"Let's try to get closer. We can move behind the barn and probably hear everything without being observed."

The two men were so engrossed in their conversation that they failed to see the girls moving stealthily across the clearing. A moment more and they were protected by the barn.

Penny and Susan crept as close to the men as they dared and then stood listening. They could hear Walter Crocker speaking.

"This is the last warning I'll give you," he told the old man. "Will you fork up the money or shall I go to the authorities?"

"Give me time," Herman replied in a whining voice. "I've already given you all the cash I have in the bank."

"I know better," said Walter Crocker grimly. "You have plenty of money but you're too miserly to part with it. But maybe you'd rather keep your stolen gold and go to jail!"

"You can't send me to jail—I've done nothing wrong."

"No?" asked the other mockingly. "I suppose you consider it perfectly legal to appropriate the inheritance of your nephew and lead townfolks to believe that your sister died without leaving a child."

"You have no proof that you are Jenny's child. I'm not going to pay you another cent. It's blackmail!"

"Call it what you like," replied Walter Crocker with a sneer. "I am your sister Jenny's child whom you thought to be safely out of the way. And I do have proof."

"I don't believe it," retorted the old man. "There could be no proof."

"You've already given me five hundred dollars hush money which is indication enough that you accept my story as the truth."

"I did that merely to get rid of you."

"Well, you'll not escape so easily this time, Mr. Crocker. Either you turn over a good portion of the estate to me or I'll go to law."

"Your case would be thrown out of court. Without proof——"

"My proof will stand up in any court," Walter Crocker interrupted. "It happens that I have a certain packet of letters which were written to you by my mother before her death. And there is another communication from a woman named Hilda Frank——"

"So you are the one who stole the letters from the trunk of my cottage!" Herman Crocker cried in rage. "I could have you arrested for house breaking!"

"I'd not act too hastily if I were you," returned the nephew coolly. "However, I didn't steal the letters. They came into my possession in a perfectly legitimate way."

"I know better. You could have obtained those letters only by stealing them!"

"I'll not argue with you," replied Walter

Crocker evenly, "for after all it is immaterial. The point is that I have the letters. Now will you come to terms or shall I tell my story around Kendon?"

There was a long silence and then the girls heard Old Herman say in a weary voice:

"How much do you want?"

"I thought you would be reasonable in the matter," the other returned triumphantly. "I understand that my mother left an estate of eighty thousand dollars."

"It was a great deal less than that," Old Herman muttered.

"Not wishing to be too hard on you I'll settle for an even fifty thousand dollars," Walter Crocker went on.

"Fifty thousand dollars," the old man groaned. "It's robbery."

"You forget that I am entitled to the entire estate. It was you who robbed me. Well, do you agree?"

"You must give me time to raise the money."

"I'll expect a first installment in exactly one week from today," Walter Crocker said firmly.

"I'll pay it only on one condition," replied the old man with rising spirit. "You must deliver to me the packet of letters. Otherwise I'd be blackmailed out of every penny I own."

"You'll get the letters all right."

"Show them to me now."

"I can't do that," Walter Crocker replied, and Penny thought she detected a trace of uneasiness in his voice.

"Perhaps you haven't the letters at all," Herman Crocker said quickly.

"Oh, yes, I have. But I don't carry them around with me. I'll bring them a week from today."

"All right, but remember, no letters, no money. And another thing, I can't have you coming here. Already folks are talking about your car being in my barn. I shouldn't have towed it here for you."

"Would you have wanted me to take it to a Kendon garage?"

"No," answered Herman Crocker shortly.

"I thought not. Well, where shall I meet you if you don't want me coming here?"

"At the footbridge by the ravine."

"Where is that?" Walter Crocker asked.

"A quarter of a mile below my cottage. Be there next Thursday night at ten o'clock."

"I'll be waiting," returned the young man. He started to walk away.

"Are you taking your car?" Herman Crocker called after him. "I fixed the wheel."

"Yes, I'll get it now," the young man replied.

As the girls saw Old Herman walk toward the house alone they felt a trifle sorry for him. There was no question as to his misdeeds, yet their sympathies went out to him rather than to Walter Crocker who evidently had been deprived of his rightful inheritance.

Penny and Susan heard the barn doors open and knew that the young man was getting out his car. As he remained in the building longer than seemed necessary, they moved around to a dust covered window and peered curiously inside.

"Why, he's searching for something!" Penny whispered.

Walter Crocker had removed the seat cushions and was examining every inch of the automobile.

His face was twisted with worry. The girls could hear him muttering angrily to himself.

"What do you imagine he has lost?" Susan asked in an undertone. "You can tell by the way he acts that it's something important."

"I don't know, of course," Penny replied with a chuckle. "But I have a sneaking idea it may be Herman Crocker's packet of letters!"

CHAPTER XV

The Missing Letters

"WHAT makes you think he has lost the letters?" Susan whispered to her chum. "Didn't he tell Herman Crocker that he would positively deliver them next Thursday night?"

"Yes," nodded Penny, "but obviously he had to say that. I thought he acted very uneasy as if he might not have the evidence in his possession."

The girls did not peep into the barn again for they were afraid that Herman Crocker might see them. Quietly they stole back to the woods and started for the cottage.

"Well, Penny, you were right about Old Herman being a mysterious character," Susan commented as they walked along.

"I feel a little disappointed though," Penny returned. "Now that everything is explained so nicely we'll not have any more fun."

"There are a great many things I don't understand."

"I'm not clear on every point," Penny admitted, "but in general I have an idea of the trouble."

"Then I wish you'd explain it to me."

"Well, from the conversation we overheard, it's evident that Walter Crocker is trying to blackmail his uncle. Only legally I suppose it wouldn't be blackmail because Walter is entitled to the entire fortune."

"Then you believe Herman Crocker really did cheat him out of the money?" Susan asked.

"Mr. Crocker practically admitted it, didn't he? I gathered that sometime during his life he had received letters from his sister, Jenny, and another woman—letters which probably mentioned the boy, Walter. Herman made a bad mistake when he kept those communications."

"But what became of Walter after Jenny's death?" Susan questioned in deep perplexity. "Why didn't his claim to the fortune come up at that time? And how did he get the letters?"

"In some manner Old Herman must have kept

Walter in ignorance," Penny replied thoughtfully. "I have no idea how he finally learned the truth. As for the letters, I believe they were stored in the trunk of the cottage attic."

"Think what an opportunity you missed!" Susan exclaimed.

"I'm not sure how long the letters have been there. I remember that several days ago Old Herman came to the cottage and went to the attic. At the time I couldn't imagine what he was after. Now I feel certain he was alarmed because Walter Crocker had attempted to extort money from him. Undoubtedly, he came to find the letters which he knew would stand as damaging evidence against him."

"You think the letters already had been taken?" Susan questioned.

"Herman didn't find what he was after I know. You remember he accused Walter of stealing the letters."

"Yes, but he denied the charge."

"Walter might have been lying, but he acted sincere," Penny said slowly. "Anyway, when I

looked in the trunk—that was after Herman had visited the cottage—a package of letters was still there. However, I doubt that it was the right packet or Herman would have taken it with him."

"Yet you told me that when you went to the attic the second time, the letters were gone," Susan reminded her chum.

"That is right. If the letters wouldn't stand as damaging evidence against Herman I don't see who would want them."

"Mightn't it have been that man who tried to break into your cottage at night?"

"It could have been all right," Penny admitted, "but I didn't hear the fellow in the attic. I was under the impression that he had just entered the cottage when I awoke."

"It seems to me that there is a great deal which isn't explained."

"The part about the letters is still a deep mystery," Penny acknowledged. "But we do know that Old Herman cheated his nephew out of a fortune, and that fate has caught up with him at last."

"I suppose the old man deserves everything he

gets," Susan commented. "I don't like him a bit, but for that matter there's something about Walter Crocker that gives me the creeps too. He has such a snakey look!"

The girls emerged from the woods close to the Nichols' cottage. Observing that an automobile stood by the fence, they both halted.

"Why, that is Walter Crocker's car!" Susan exclaimed in an undertone.

"He must have driven straight over here from Herman's place," Penny added. "Now what do you suppose he wants?"

The girls walked slowly on. As they drew near the automobile, Walter Crocker alighted and tipped his hat politely.

"How do you do, Miss Nichols," he said with a forced smile. "I'm not sure if you remember me or not."

"I remember you perfectly," replied Penny, hiding her uneasiness.

She was afraid that the man might have seen Susan and herself peeping through the window of the barn.

"I feel very grateful for the ride which you and your father gave me some nights ago," said Walter Crocker. "I must apologize for running off the way I did without thanking you. I was in such a hurry to reach my uncle's home."

Penny and Susan drew a breath of relief. They were glad that the man did not intend to question them concerning their latest actions.

"Oh, that was quite all right," Penny replied. "We assumed that you had gone on to Mr. Crocker's place."

The young man shifted his weight uneasily. "Oh, by the way," he said, "I don't suppose you found a package of letters in the rumble seat?"

"Letters?" repeated Penny.

"I thought perhaps they might have dropped from my pocket while I was riding with you."

"Were they valuable?" asked Penny very innocently.

"Only to me," answered Walter Crocker shortly. "But I must have them back. Do you mind if I look in the back end of your car?"

"You'd be welcome to search if it were here."

"Where is the car?" demanded the man, in his anxiety forgetting to be polite.

"I couldn't say right now, Mr. Crocker. My father has the automobile."

"When will he return?"

"Probably not before evening," Penny replied, thinking quickly. "You might drop back after supper. He should be here by then."

"Thank you," said Walter Crocker shortly.

He climbed into the car and drove away.

"That's a good one!" laughed Penny, highly amused. "He has lost the Crocker letters all right, and he thinks they may be in our car!"

"Don't you expect your father home before night?" asked Susan.

"Of course I don't know exactly when he'll come," chuckled Penny. "But I'd not be surprised to see him driving in any minute. I wanted to give myself plenty of time to examine the car before Mr. Crocker returns."

"What would you do if you found the letters, Penny?"

"I haven't thought that far," Penny admitted.

"But the chance that they're in our car is a very slim one."

The girls stationed themselves on the front porch so that they would not miss Mr. Nichols when he drove in. Two hours later they glimpsed the car coming up Knob Hill.

Penny meant to tell her father everything that had happened during the day, but the detective seemed to have important matters on his mind. When the girls ran down to the car to meet him, he responded absent-mindedly to their greetings and went on into the cottage.

"Penny!" exclaimed Susan. "There's another auto coming up the hill!"

"And it looks like Walter Crocker's car!" Penny cried in alarm. "Quick! We've no time to lose!"

The girls darted to Mr. Nichols' automobile and lifted up the rumble seat. While Susan anxiously watched the road, Penny climbed up and peered into the bottom of the car.

"Susan, they're here!" she squealed in delight.

"And so is Walter Crocker," Susan muttered in an undertone. "He's looking right this way."

With her back turned to the approaching automobile, Penny deftly slipped the package of letters into the front of her dress. She pretended to keep on searching in the bottom of the car.

"Act as if everything is perfectly natural," she warned Susan in a whisper.

Mr. Crocker stopped his car with a jerk and sprang out. He glanced suspiciously at the girls as he came toward them.

"Oh, how do you do, Mr. Crocker," Penny said, climbing slowly down from the rumble. "Dad just drove in a minute ago. I was looking for your letters."

"Are they there?" the man asked sharply.

"Perhaps you ought to look," Penny replied, avoiding Susan's glance. "I had just started to search when you drove up."

Walter Crocker climbed up on the step and made a careful examination of the interior of the automobile. Penny and Susan stood watching him with perfectly innocent faces. They knew that he would not find the letters.

The man did not like to give up.

"They may have been pushed up forward out of sight," he said. "Do you have a flashlight?"

"I'll get one from the garage," Penny offered.

She and Susan went into the building, lingering there while they enjoyed a good laugh at the expense of Walter Crocker.

They were just ready to return with the flashlight when Penny suddenly placed a restraining hand on Susan's arm.

"Wait!" she whispered.

Unaware that the girls were in the garage, Mrs. Masterbrook came hurrying from the cottage. She went directly toward Walter Crocker, her face convulsed with anger.

"Why did you come here?" she demanded. "You should have known better!"

"I had to come," retorted the man in an undertone. He cast an anxious glance toward the garage. "Now get away from here unless you want to give everything away!"

"I didn't know anyone was around," the housekeeper muttered. She turned and fled into the house.

Penny and Susan waited a minute or two before emerging from the garage with the flashlight.

"Sorry I was so long," apologized Penny.

"It doesn't matter," replied Walter Crocker crossly. "I've looked everywhere. The letters aren't here."

"You must have dropped them some other place," said Susan innocently.

"Yes," nodded Penny, "you might have left them at Mr. Crocker's place. Have you inquired there?"

"No, I haven't," the man replied shortly.

Without another word he climbed into his own car and drove away.

"That was a good quip—telling him to inquire of Herman Crocker!" Susan laughed after the man was out of sight. "I thought he would explode with rage!"

Penny was staring thoughtfully toward the house.

"Susan," she said, "Mrs. Masterbrook evidently knew Walter Crocker."

"Yes, that was queer, wasn't it?"

"She seemed to be afraid of him," Penny went on

in a low voice. "Or rather, she appeared to fear that someone would find him here at the cottage. What do you make of it?"

"I think," drawled Susan, "that the mystery is a long way from explained."

"And I agree with you," said Penny, "but these letters may help a little. Come on, let's go down to the ravine and read them."

CHAPTER XVI

A Lost Handkerchief

THE girls ran down the path to the ravine, selecting a sunny spot by a large rock. From where they sat they could look far down the valley and see the swinging footbridge which Herman Crocker had designated as a meeting place with his nephew.

"Well, here are the letters," Penny said gaily, removing them from her dress. "Wouldn't Walter rave if he knew we had them!"

"They're worth fifty thousand dollars!" Susan laughed. "At least that's the price Walter expects to make his uncle pay for them. Penny, what would happen if we just kept these letters?"

"I suppose Old Herman would refuse to pay over the money. I know I should in his case."

"Then why wouldn't that be a good solution of the matter?"

"It would from Old Herman's standpoint,"

Penny said dryly. "But you're forgetting that Walter isn't actually a blackmailer. The money really belongs to him."

"Then by keeping these letters we might be depriving him of his rightful inheritance?"

"It seems that way. I don't like Walter any better than you do—he appears to be a rather unscrupulous fellow even if he does have the law on his side. However, we can't let our personal feelings enter into the matter."

"That being the case, why did we interfere at all?" Susan asked. "Wouldn't it have been better not to have taken the letters? Now if we decide to give then back, we'll have a lot of explaining to do."

"You are perfectly right, of course, Susan. My curiosity simply got the best of me again. I felt as if I had to read these letters."

"Then let's read them," Susan laughed.

Penny untied the cord which bound the letters into a neat package. There were eight of them all addressed to Herman Crocker. Return notations in the corners showed that five of the letters were

from the old man's sister, Jenny. The others were from the woman named Hilda Frank and were postmarked, Belgrade Lakes, Maine.

"That is a summer resort place," Penny commented as she opened the first letter. "If Herman's sister had plenty of money she may have been staying there."

Susan crowded close beside her chum so that they might read the communications together. The letter from Hilda Frank disclosed several facts of interest. The woman, evidently a housekeeper for Herman's sister, had written to say that her mistress had passed away following a sudden illness. She wished Herman to come at once to take charge of funeral arrangements and to look after Jenny's young son, Walter.

"Jenny thought that no one would take care of him as well as you," the housekeeper wrote," and the money she left will be more than enough to keep him. It is her wish as expressed in her will that if anything should ever happen to the boy, you are to be the sole heir—otherwise the money is to be kept in trust.

"This will signed by my mistress on the day before her death is now in my possession. I await your arrival before filing it with the court."

The two additional letters from Hilda Frank had been written weeks later, and inquired after the welfare of the boy, Walter, indicating that Herman Crocker after going east to attend his sister's funeral had brought the lad home with him.

"But we're quite certain Herman never arrived here with Walter," Penny commented thoughtfully. "The only boy who has ever been seen at the Crocker place is the old man's grandson."

"What do you think happened?" Susan asked.

"Obviously, from all we have learned, Herman must have decided that he wanted all the money for himself. He then had the boy conveniently disappear."

"How could he hope to get away with anything as crude as that?"

"I don't know, but his plan seemed to work for many years. I suppose there weren't many persons who ever suspected that Jenny had a child."

"Mrs. Frank did."

"Yes, but Herman probably quieted her with some simple story. Anyway, she lived in Maine and that's a long way from here."

"It's inconceivable that he could get by with such high-handed robbery! Stealing from a child!"

"It is disgusting," Penny agreed. "We don't know what became of Walter, but probably he was brought up by some strange person in complete ignorance of his heritage."

"Then how did he learn his true name and that he had a right to the fortune? How did he know about these letters in the trunk?"

"My theory collapses right there," Penny admitted ruefully. "I can't figure that part out at all."

"Let's read the other letters," Susan suggested. "We may learn something from them."

The remaining communications were of no help at all. They were merely friendly letters written by Jenny to her brother telling him how much she and her son were enjoying their stay at the Lakes. She spoke at some length of her declining health and in one paragraph mentioned that if anything

ever happened to her she trusted Herman would take good care of Walter.

"After receiving a letter like that how could the old man be mean enough to act the way he did?" Susan asked angrily. "It serves him right to lose the fortune! I'm glad that Walter finally learned the truth."

"So am I," Penny agreed. "Only it's too bad the young man couldn't have turned out to be a nicer type."

"He may not have had the advantage of a good home."

"I realize that, but aside from breeding, I don't like him."

"The point is—what shall we do with these letters?"

"Oh, I guess I'll have to give them back," Penny sighed. "I'll do it sometime before Thursday night."

She retied the letters and slipped them into her pocket. Before the girls could leave the ravine, they heard someone coming through the woods.

A moment later Michael Haymond appeared

along the path. He was whistling a tune but broke off as he noticed Penny and Susan.

"Hello," he said pleasantly. "It's another warm day, isn't it?"

Penny and Susan had been too busy to notice the weather, but they agreed that it was unpleasantly humid. Michael paused to chat for a minute or two, and took out a handkerchief to wipe his forehead.

"Have you been cutting more wood?" Penny asked with a smile.

"Yes, I didn't know what else to do."

"We have enough wood to last longer than we'll remain at the cottage," Penny said. "Why don't you try resting now and then?"

"I'm not paid to do that."

"You more than earn your salary," Penny told him. "Dad doesn't care whether you keep busy or not."

"Your father has been very good to me," Michael said soberly. "I don't feel right about it. I think he's keeping me on because he knows I'd have trouble getting any other job."

"Nonsense, Michael."

"I don't feel right about drawing pay for nothing," the young man repeated.

"You let him worry about that," Penny laughed. "Anyway, I suppose we'll be going back to the city soon."

Her words seemed to startle Michael, but after a moment of silence, he nodded.

"Well, I'll be getting on up to the cottage," he said. "Mrs. Masterbrook probably has a job for me. When she can't think of anything else she has me peel potatoes."

"That's her work, not yours," Penny told him. "You're altogether too easy, Michael."

"Your father said that part of my job was to keep Mrs. Masterbrook quiet," the young man grinned as he turned away. "I've discovered that the best way is to do exactly what she wishes with no argument!"

Michael bowed again to the girls and walked on up the path.

"I like him better every day," Susan declared in an undertone. "I think it's a great joke on you,

Penny! When he first came here you thought he might be a questionable character."

Penny did not pay very much heed to her chum's words for she was staring at an object lying on the path.

"Michael dropped his handkerchief," she said.

"So he did," Susan agreed indifferently, turning to look. "We can take it to him."

Penny picked up the handkerchief, noticing as she folded it that the linen was not a very expensive grade. She suspected that Michael did not have very much money to spend upon clothing.

Turning the handkerchief over in her hand, Penny saw that it bore a monogram.

"Why, that's odd!" she murmured aloud.

"Now what have you discovered, little Miss Detective?" Susan asked teasingly.

"Look at the markings on this handkerchief," Penny commanded. "The initials are 'M. G.'"

CHAPTER XVII

A New Clue

"'M. G.'", Susan repeated slowly, staring at the handkerchief. "What's so startling about that?"

"Michael dropped this handkerchief," Penny said significantly.

"And his last name is Haymond!" Susan cried as light dawned upon her. "Why would he have a handkerchief marked 'M. G.'?"

"Why indeed? The simple answer is that maybe his name isn't Michael Haymond after all!"

"Maybe he happened to pick up some other person's handkerchief."

"He'd not be apt to be using it."

"Once one of yours got into our washing somehow," Susan defended her theory. "Don't you remember I was using it for one of my own until you happened to notice it?"

"That was different," Penny replied. "I'll ven-

ture this is Michael's handkerchief all right."

"Oh, you're too suspicious," laughed Susan. "Remember that wild chase we had to Glenhaven just because you thought Michael might be hiding something about his past."

"I'm not sure that it was a wild chase at all," Penny answered soberly. "If you recall, Michael fitted into Mrs. Havers story quite nicely—everything except his last name. And now the initials of this handkerchief could stand for Michael Gladwin."

"Why, that's so," Susan murmured in astonishment. "But it doesn't seem reasonable! What has Michael done that he's ashamed to have his true name known?"

"I may be jumping at another one of my false conclusions," Penny admitted. "Anyway, I think I'll keep this handkerchief."

"If only we had a picture of Michael we might send it to Mrs. Havers for identification," Susan said thoughtfully.

"I was thinking of that," Penny nodded. "We'll get a picture today."

"How? By telling Michael that you've suddenly taken a great fancy to him?"

"We'll take a snapshot. Fortunately I brought my camera along when we came to Kendon."

"Do you have a film?"

"Yes, it's all loaded ready to go."

"Then let's get our prey!" laughed Susan. "But Michael may refuse."

"He shouldn't unless we make him suspicious. Mind, not a word about the handkerchief."

The girls went directly to the cottage for Penny's camera. First they flattered Mrs. Masterbrook by requesting her picture. The housekeeper posed on the porch steps.

"We'd like your picture too," Penny said to Michael who was standing near.

"I'd break your camera," the young man laughed goodnaturedly.

"Oh, don't be silly," Susan cried, and catching him by the hand, pulled him up on the porch.

Penny snapped the picture. To make certain that she would have a good one, she took still another.

"That's enough," declared Michael moving away.

Mrs. Masterbrook lingered on the porch, hoping that the girls would take another picture of her. However, they had no intention of wasting any film.

"Let's get it developed right away," Susan declared.

"There's one more picture I'd like to take just to make the record complete," Penny announced as she and her chum walked away from the cottage.

"Whose?" asked Susan.

"Herman Crocker's."

"It would be interesting to keep it as a souvenir of your vacation," Susan agreed. "But try to get it!"

"I believe I could."

"You'd try anything."

"We'll have an hour before the sun is low," Penny declared, glancing toward the western horizon. "Come on, let's go there now."

"I don't like the idea a bit," Susan complained but she allowed her chum to lead her down the road.

"I'll have to think up a new excuse for calling on Herman," Penny remarked as they drew near the house. "That one about wanting to buy eggs is getting pretty thread bare."

"You're inviting trouble to go there again," Susan warned darkly. "Herman will suspect something is wrong the minute you ask for his picture."

"I don't mean to ask," Penny chuckled. "Perhaps I'll just snap it and run."

There was no sign of activity about the Crocker premises. They did not see the dog, and when they rapped on the door there was no response.

"Mr. Crocker and his grandson are gone," Susan said in relief.

"I guess I'll have to give up the picture then," Penny sighed. "I had a particular use for it too."

"Why don't you snap one of the house?" Susan suggested.

"I might do that just to finish out the roll. Then we can take the film down to Kendon and have it developed."

"You mean now?"

"Yes, I'm in a hurry to get the prints. Dad may

take it into his head to leave this place any day and I have considerable unfinished business on my calendar."

"It seems as if I've walked a million miles today," Susan grumbled good-naturedly.

"It's good for your figure," Penny laughed. "You don't want to get fat."

"No chance of it around you," Susan retorted.

Penny took the picture and removed the roll of exposed film from her camera. Walking down Knob Hill, the girls left it at one of the drugstores in Kendon.

"How soon may we have the prints?" Penny asked.

"Tomorrow afternoon," the clerk promised.

When the girls had left the drugstore, Penny suggested that they drop in for a moment at Turner's.

"Are you still hopeful that someone will claim the toy lantern?" Susan inquired with a trace of amusement.

"No, I gave up long ago," Penny admitted. "I just keep asking as a matter of routine."

"Mr. Turner would let you know if anything develops."

"He might forget," Penny insisted. "Let's drop in for just a minute."

Susan sighed wearily and followed her chum into the store. Mr. Turner did not look very pleased to see them. He had grown tired of their frequent calls.

"Nothing new?" Penny asked pleasantly.

The storekeeper shook his head. "I think you may as well take the lantern with you," he said. "I'm convinced it doesn't belong to any child around here."

"It begins to look that way," Penny admitted.

She was debating what to do when she felt Susan pluck her sleeve. Glancing quickly up she was surprised to see that Perry Crocker had entered the store. The boy did not notice the girls but walked toward the candy department.

"I didn't know Old Herman ever let him go any place alone," Susan whispered.

"Neither did I," Penny agreed. "Probably Perry's grandfather is waiting outside."

Susan started toward the boy, but Penny restrained her.

"Wait!" she whispered.

The boy had gone directly to the candy counter.

"Good afternoon, Perry," said the storekeeper. "I don't see you very often."

"Today is my birthday," the boy explained in an excited voice. "I'm eleven years old. My grandfather gave me ten cents to spend."

"That's fine," said the storekeeper. "What kind of candy will you have?"

"I want some of those caramels and lemon drops. Or would I get more——"

Perry broke off to stare at the broken toy lantern which stood on the storekeeper's shelf directly behind the candy counter.

"Why, where did you get my lantern?" he asked quickly. "Give it to me."

"Is this your lantern?" the storekeeper questioned, glancing toward Penny and Susan who had remained some distance away.

"Of course it's mine," said Perry. "Please give it to me."

"But how do I know it is yours?" asked Mr. Turner. He had been coached carefully by Mr. Nichols. "A great many boys have lanterns exactly like this."

"It's really mine, Mr. Turner," Perry insisted. "I can tell because I made a new wick for it out of an old piece of white cloth. Someone has smashed the isinglass."

Mr. Turner again glanced inquiringly toward Penny. She nodded her head as a signal that he was to give the lantern to the boy.

"Very well, Perry, here you are," the storekeeper said, handing him the toy. "Now what kind of candy do you want?"

He filled the order and Perry left the store without observing Penny and Susan. Through the plate glass window the girls saw him show the toy lantern to his grandfather. Then he climbed into the car and they drove away.

"I hope I did right to let him take the toy," said the storekeeper anxiously.

"Yes, you did," said Penny quietly. "The lantern has served its purpose now."

"I was very much surprised that it belonged to Perry," went on Mr. Turner.

"It was somewhat of a shock to me too," Penny acknowledged.

"Your father told me a little about the case," the storekeeper continued. "I fear that this clue has no significance for Perry's grandfather is an upstanding man in the community."

"I quite understand," replied Penny gravely. "Thank you for going to so much trouble to help my father. I'm sure that he'll not wish you to speak of this matter to anyone."

"I'll keep it to myself," Mr. Turner promised. "If there is anything more I can do, let me know."

The instant that the girls were outside the store they lost their serene attitude.

"Now what's our move?" asked Susan tensely.

"We must get home as fast as we can and tell Dad," Penny replied. "This clue has a lot more significance than Mr. Turner believes. It probably means that Herman Crocker is the man who took the Kirmenbach jewels!"

CHAPTER XVIII

Inside the Gabled House

PENNY and Susan ran nearly all of the way back up Knob Hill. They were quite out of breath by the time they reached the cottage.

"Is there a fire somewhere?" inquired Mr. Nichols, who was reading the evening paper on the porch. "Or are you girls running a race?"

Penny cast a quick glance about to be certain that neither Michael nor Mrs. Masterbrook were near.

"Dad," she announced impressively. "The toy lantern has been claimed."

The detective dropped his paper and quickly arose.

"By whom?" he asked.

"It was Perry Crocker who took the lantern away, Dad. Susan and I were in the store when he came in for candy."

"He made a positive identification?"

"Oh, yes, Dad," Penny declared. "Perry told Mr. Turner that he had constructed the wick from an old piece of cloth in the house."

"Then it looks as if Herman Crocker may be mixed up in the robbery."

"Don't you remember that from the very first I said he was a suspicious character," Penny reminded her father.

"Yes, I remember," Mr. Nichols replied dryly.

"What will you do now, Dad? Have Mr. Crocker arrested?"

"Not without more evidence against him," returned the detective. "Our clue is an important one but it may not lead where we expect. It's a serious matter to arrest a man on a false charge."

"But it must be Herman Crocker," Penny argued. "We know Perry couldn't have committed the robbery."

"You say that you saw Herman in town?" Mr. Nichols inquired.

"Yes, he waited for Perry in the car and then drove away."

"Toward home?"

"Why, I didn't notice," Penny admitted.

"I did," Susan declared, eager to make a contribution. "He was driving the opposite way."

"Then there is a chance he may not have returned home yet," Mr. Nichols said. "I'm going down there and look around."

"May I go along, Dad?" Penny asked eagerly.

"You both may come," Mr. Nichols said after a slight hesitation, "but you must do exactly as I say."

At that moment Mrs. Masterbrook appeared in the doorway.

"Supper is ready," she announced.

"You'll have to keep it waiting," the detective told her. "I've just remembered an important engagement."

"I always serve at exactly six o'clock," Mrs. Masterbrook said primly. "The food won't be good if it stands."

"That doesn't matter to me," Mr. Nichols returned impatiently. "We'll hash up our own supper when we get back."

As he and the girls walked away, the housekeeper

stood watching them with keen displeasure. Penny wondered if the woman guessed that they were going to the Herman Crocker place.

During the hike down Knob Hill, the girls told Mr. Nichols everything they had learned about Herman Crocker and his nephew, Walter. This time the detective did not term Penny's ideas wild. He listened in a manner which was most flattering.

"It's all a mix-up," Penny finished. "I feel sure that Mrs. Masterbrook is acquainted with Walter Crocker because she warned him to keep away from our cottage."

"Mrs. Masterbrook seems to have her finger in every pie," commented Mr. Nichols. "But I'm not much concerned with her affairs, or whether or not Old Herman has cheated his nephew. I'm only interested in learning if he is the one who stole the diamond necklace."

"If he'd rob his nephew it follows that he'd be the type to take jewels too."

"Not necessarily," answered the detective. "House breaking is a different sort of crime entirely. The fact is, Herman Crocker doesn't im-

press me as being the kind of person who would commit such an act."

"The evidence is all against him," Penny argued.

"It is," Mr. Nichols agreed. "But one can't put too much faith in circumstantial proof. We must investigate first and draw our conclusions later."

The three were close to the Crocker premises by this time. There was no sign of the old man's car, and Mr. Nichols felt hopeful that he had not yet returned from town.

At the entrance of the lane, Mr. Nichols paused.

"Susan," he said, "I'd like to have you remain here. If you see Crocker's car coming up the road, run to the house as fast as you can and call out a warning."

"I'll keep a careful watch," Susan promised.

Mr. Nichols and Penny hurried on up the lane. They were quite certain that Mr. Crocker and his grandson had not returned from Kendon, but taking no chance, they pounded several times on the door.

"The place is empty all right," Mr. Nichols declared.

He tried the door and found it locked. Nor could they enter by either the side or rear entrance.

"How are we going to get in?" Penny asked in disappointment.

"One of the windows should be unlocked," Mr. Nichols said, looking up speculatively. "Here, I'll give you a boost."

He lifted Penny on his shoulders so that she could reach one of the high windows.

"Locked," she reported.

"All right, we'll try another," said the detective.

The second window likewise proved to be fastened, but when Penny tried the third one it opened.

"Good!" exclaimed Mr. Nichols. "Jump down inside and open the door!"

Penny found herself gazing into an untidy living room. The rug was moth eaten and there was dust everywhere on the old fashioned Victorian furniture. The walls were heavy with family pictures in wooden frames, and Penny's attention was drawn to a curious feather wreath.

"Hurry!" warned Mr. Nichols from below.

"I'll be there in a jiffy," Penny called back.

She jumped lightly down and ran to unfasten the door. Mr. Nichols entered and closed it behind him, turning the night lock.

"We'll have to work fast," he said crisply. "Old Herman may come back any minute."

"What do you expect to find?" asked Penny.

"Perhaps the necklace or at least some evidence which will attach Herman to the crime. I'll start searching in the upstairs bedrooms. You might go through that desk."

With a nod of his head, the detective indicated an old fashioned secretary which stood in one corner of the living room.

The desk was filled to overflowing with papers of all sorts. A quick inspection satisfied Penny that the diamond necklace was not there, but if she had time she meant to examine the papers carefully.

"When you finish with the desk, start looking through the kitchen cupboards," Mr. Nichols called down from upstairs.

Penny was working swiftly at her task when the detective came down to assist her.

"There's nothing in the bedrooms," he reported. "I thought Old Herman might have hidden the jewels in one of the mattresses. Having any luck here?"

"None yet, but there are a lot of papers in the desk."

"We'll get to those later," Mr. Nichols nodded.

The detective made a swift but thorough inspection of the kitchen. He examined the floor boards to see if any had been pried loose and even poked into the rag bag.

"Here's something!" he said triumphantly, pulling out a piece of white cloth.

"Why, that is the same material I saw in Turner's store!" Penny exclaimed.

"Yes, it was used to make the wick of the lantern. We'll keep it for evidence."

Mr. Nichols stuffed the cloth into his coat pocket.

"I've looked all through the cupboards," Penny reported. "I'm going back and examine some of those papers now."

"All right," her father agreed.

Penny had never seen such a disordered desk. Apparently, Herman Crocker had kept every letter, receipt, and paper which ever came into his possession, tossing all together in one untidy heap.

Penny thumbed rapidly through the letters, discarding all which were of a strictly business nature. Suddenly she came upon a photograph which had turned yellow with age. A glance assured Penny that it was a likeness of Herman Crocker when he had been some years younger.

"Just what I need!" she thought triumphantly. "This will be a great deal better than a snapshot!"

Slipping the photograph into her pocket she went on with her search. In one drawer of the desk she found nothing but old tax receipts showing payments paid by Herman Crocker for both the cottage property and his farm.

Penny knew she would not have time to examine each receipt in turn so she opened a second drawer. It was crammed with old checks and bank statements. In the very bottom was a thick green book.

Penny opened it up and saw that it was a detailed expense account running back many years. She

was about to toss the book carelessly aside, when a notation on one of the pages caught her eye. The item read:

"Paid to the Glenhaven Orphan's Home—$100.00 for keep of Michael Gladwin."

Penny stared at the notation for an instant, and then turned toward her father.

"Dad, I've found something important!" she exclaimed. "This account book—"

Before she could finish, there was a loud pounding on the door.

"Herman Crocker is coming up the road!" Susan Altman called excitedly. "Hurry or he'll be here!"

CHAPTER XIX

Michael's Admission

"BRING the book and come on, Penny," Mr. Nichols ordered tersely. "We don't want Crocker to catch us here."

Penny snatched up the account book, slammed shut the desk and followed her father to the door. Susan was waiting there, nervously watching the entrance to the narrow lane. A car was just coming into view.

"Duck into the pine grove," commanded the detective.

The three disappeared behind the trees just as Herman Crocker's battered old car wheezed up the lane. Mr. Nichols and the girls remained motionless until the old man and his grandson had gone into the house. Then they moved noiselessly away, keeping to the evergreen grove until they reached the main road.

"Penny, what were you starting to tell me about

an account book?" questioned Mr. Nichols as they paused.

"I'll show you," offered Penny.

She opened the account book to the item which had drawn her attention, but in the dim light it was difficult for Mr. Nichols to make out the fine writing.

"Michael Gladwin," he read slowly aloud. "I seem to be thick headed——"

"Oh, Susan and I didn't tell you that part!" Penny cried. "We think Gladwin is Michael Haymond's real name! He dropped a handkerchief bearing the initials 'M. G.', and when we were over at Glenhaven we learned from the former matron of the institution that a strange person who might have been Herman Crocker, brought a boy who was named Michael Gladwin to the Home."

"There seems to be quite a bit going on that I know nothing about," Mr. Nichols remarked dryly. "Suppose you start at the beginning, Penny, and tell me everything."

"Are you sure you'll not think my ideas wild?" Penny asked teasingly.

"I am quite willing to retract my words," Mr. Nichols said. "Your ideas and theories are proving remarkably sound."

Penny and Susan were only too glad to relate everything they had learned about Michael Gladwin.

"I'll question the young man just as soon as we reach the cottage," promised Mr. Nichols. "We'll get at the bottom of this matter and see if it can be straightened out."

"Michael may deny everything," Penny said thoughtfully. "He has some particular reason for wishing to keep his past a secret. Dad, I have an idea!"

"What is it, Penny?"

"Why couldn't we drive over to Ferndale tonight and take Michael with us? He'd have no suspicion that we were calling upon Mrs. Havers until he met her face to face!"

"Confronted with the former matron you believe that he would break down and confess the truth?"

"Yes, I think he might, Dad. At any rate, Mrs.

Havers could establish definitely whether or not he is Michael Gladwin."

"Your plan is a good one," Mr. Nichols said after a moment's reflection. "We'll start right away if we can locate Michael."

"He usually walks down to the village after supper," Penny declared anxiously. "I hope he hasn't left yet."

Michael was just starting away from the cottage when Mr. Nichols and the girls arrived. The detective stopped him, explaining that they would like to have his company on a motor trip to a distant town.

"I don't enjoy changing a tire at night," Mr. Nichols said. "While I'm not looking for trouble, I'd like to have a handy man along just in case something happens."

"I'll be very glad to go, sir," replied Michael.

"You might be getting the car from the garage," Mr. Nichols directed. "I'll be along in a minute."

He started for the cottage after his light overcoat. Mrs. Masterbrook sat rocking back and forth on the porch.

"I hope you're ready for your supper now," she said tartly.

"I've not time to eat it, Mrs. Masterbrook. I am sorry to have annoyed you this way."

"I've kept it warming for over an hour," the housekeeper said crossly. "I declare, I can't understand your comings and goings."

Paying no heed to Mrs. Masterbrook's grumblings, the detective found his coat and hastened back to the car.

"What shall I say if anyone telephones?" the housekeeper called after him. "Where shall I say you are?"

"Tell them you don't know," shouted the detective.

It was evident to Penny and Susan that Michael had no suspicion where he was being taken. Even when the automobile drew near Ferndale he did not appear to grow uneasy. He was so calm and undisturbed that they began to wonder if they had made another mistake.

"Of course the Orphan's Home isn't at Ferndale," Penny told herself. "He probably doesn't

know that Mrs. Havers has left the Glenhaven Home."

It was after nine o'clock when the car finally drew up in front of the former matron's home. The girls were afraid that Mrs. Havers might have retired early and so were greatly relieved to see a light burning on the lower floor.

"Michael, why don't you come in with us?" Penny asked as she alighted from the car.

"Oh, I'll wait out here," he replied.

"No, come along," Mr. Nichols invited.

He took Michael by the arm and steered him up the walk. Penny and Susan went on ahead to ring the doorbell. They were a little worried for fear that Mrs. Havers would not wish to receive them so late in the evening.

After a long wait, the door slowly opened. Mrs. Havers, her face hidden by the shadows, did not readily recognize the girls. However, after they had spoken, she urged them to come inside.

Penny and Susan entered the cottage and waited for Mr. Nichols and Michael. Mrs. Havers turned to face the newcomers. For an instant she stared

blankly at Michael and then she gave a cry of delight.

"Michael Gladwin! How glad I am to see you again!"

"Mrs. Havers!" exclaimed the young man. Then he became confused and glanced quickly toward Mr. Nichols.

"We've known for some time that you were Michael Gladwin," said Mr. Nichols.

"Of course he is Michael Gladwin," declared Mrs. Havers. "Who else could he be?"

"I have a great deal to explain," said the young man, looking again at the detective. "I know you surely must be thinking that I have deceived you——"

"I am sure you had a very good reason," replied Mr. Nichols kindly.

Mrs. Havers was deeply troubled by the conversation which she could not understand. She urged her visitors to seat themselves. Mr. Nichols, always restless in moments of stress, found it impossible to remain in a chair. He annoyed his hostess exceedingly by moving about the room, appearing to

examine books, bric-a-brac and objects of furniture.

"Before we ask Michael to tell his story, I should like to have you look at this picture, Mrs. Havers," said Penny. She offered the photograph of Herman Crocker. "Have you seen the man before?"

"Let me turn up the light. My eyes aren't as strong as they were."

Mrs. Havers studied the picture intently for a minute.

"This is a photograph of Mr. Keenan," said the former matron. Her gaze wandered to Michael. "He is the man who brought you to the Orphan's Home."

"You are certain?" asked Mr. Nichols eagerly.

"Of course I am," answered the old lady firmly. "I seldom forget a face. This is a very good likeness of Mr. Keenan as I remember him."

"Mr. Keenan and Herman Crocker were one and the same person!" cried Penny. "I am beginning to understand everything now!"

"Then I wish you'd explain it to me," said Michael. "I have known for some time that

Crocker was supposed to be my uncle, but until now I rather doubted that there was any truth to the story."

"How did you learn that he was related to you?" Penny asked quickly.

"Through an anonymous letter," Michael replied. "It was forwarded to me after I left the Glenhaven Home. The writer informed me that my true name was Walter Crocker and that I would find evidence to support my claim to the Crocker fortune at your cottage."

"So your visit to Kendon was made for the purpose of claiming Crocker's money," Mr. Nichols said musing. "What did you expect to find in our cottage."

"I don't know, sir," Michael returned soberly. "I thought possibly there might be letters or photographs which would establish my true identity."

"Were you the person whom I mistook for a robber a few nights ago?" Penny questioned.

"Yes," Michael admitted. "I shouldn't have been prowling about the house, but in the day time I never had a chance to search. When you heard me

in the living room I ran out the door and hid in the woods."

"And I suppose it was you who took a package of letters from the attic trunk," Penny went on.

"I did take some letters, but they were valueless. To tell you the truth, I haven't a scrap of evidence to support my claim."

"I think we may be able to help you," Mr. Nichols said slowly. "But you must answer several questions. I recall that when you first came to our cottage you told us you intended to see Mr. Crocker on business. Yet to my knowledge you never went to see him."

"I don't wonder that my actions appear contrary, sir. I intended to visit Herman Crocker immediately, but while I was at your cottage, a remark was dropped which led me to believe that another person who claimed to be Walter Crocker already had called upon my uncle."

"That is true," the detective nodded. "There is another young man who claims to be Walter Crocker."

"You see my position, sir. I had no proof of any-

thing. I was afraid that someone had played a joke on me. For that reason I gave a false name and said nothing of the matter. I thought I would wait a few days until I had gained more information."

"You acted wisely," Mr. Nichols declared.

"Obviously, Walter Crocker is an imposter," Penny said. "But who is he? What is his true name and how did he obtain the evidence against Herman Crocker?"

"We may be able to answer all those questions before we finish with the case," returned the detective. "If Mrs. Havers will testify that Michael is the same boy who was brought to the Glenhaven Home by Mr. Keenan and that Keenan and Crocker are the same person, it will be a simple matter to establish a claim to the fortune."

"The man of this photograph is the same individual who came to the Home years ago," declared Mrs. Havers. "I will be glad to sign papers to that effect."

"The masquerading Walter Crocker is merely a blackmailer," the detective continued. "Undoubtedly, he knew that he could never establish

a court claim to the fortune. But with the letters in his possession, he was able to frighten Herman Crocker into dealing with him privately."

"What finally became of the letters?" inquired Michael.

"Dad has them," said Penny. "And we have other evidence which should help your cause. At Crocker's house we found an account book showing that the old man paid the Glenhaven Home various amounts of money."

"I can't understand why a man would do such a thing," Michael said slowly. "Why did my uncle hate me?"

"Probably he didn't," replied the detective. "You merely stood in Mr. Crocker's way. Greed leads many a person astray."

"It was queer that for years Herman Crocker fooled everyone in Kendon," Penny remarked. "And then someone must have discovered his secret."

"I am puzzled by the anonymous letter," Mr. Nichols admitted, turning to Michael again. "I don't suppose you have it with you?"

"Yes, I do. You may read it if you wish."

Michael took a crumpled envelope from his inside coat pocket and offered it to the detective. Mr. Nichols scanned it briefly.

"The letter was postmarked at Kendon," he said.

"May I see it, Dad?" requested Penny.

He gave the letter to her and she studied it for a moment in silence. The communication contained no new information. As Michael had said, it merely hinted that he was the true heir to the Crocker fortune, and that he would find evidence to support his claim at the Knob Hill cottage. Penny was more interested in the handwriting than in the message. It seemed to her that it looked strangely familiar.

"Why, I've seen this writing before!" she exclaimed.

"Do you know who sent the letter?" asked her father quickly.

"I can make a very shrewd guess," replied Penny. "It was our all-wise housekeeper, Mrs. Masterbrook!"

CHAPTER XX

Alias Jay Kline

"IT WOULD be in keeping with Mrs. Masterbrook's character to send an anonymous letter," Mr. Nichols agreed quickly.

"I am just sure this is her handwriting," Penny insisted. "I'd not be mistaken for she has made out so many grocery lists."

Mr. Nichols took the letter and put it in his pocket.

"Then Mrs. Masterbrook is the one person who should be able to clear up this tangle," he said. "We'll go to the cottage and question her."

Thanking Mrs. Havers for the aid she had offered, the party left Ferndale and made a swift trip back to Kendon. Unaware that she was under suspicion, Mrs. Masterbrook had retired when Mr. Nichols and the young people arrived. The detective pounded on her door.

"What is it?" called the housekeeper.

"Please come out here a minute," requested Mr. Nichols.

"I am ready for bed. Can't you tell me what you want from there."

"No, I cannot, Mrs. Masterbrook. Come out unless you prefer to tell your story to a policeman."

"A policeman!" echoed the housekeeper with a little shriek. "Oh, my goodness! I'll come right out."

She was dressed in five minutes but did not take time to remove the curlers from her hair.

"Just what is it that you wish?" she asked tartly as she gazed from one person to another. Everyone was watching her soberly.

"Look at this letter," said Mr. Nichols, placing the anonymous communication in her lap.

A flush spread over the housekeeper's face but she threw back her head defiantly.

"Well, what about it?"

"We know that you wrote the letter," said the detective sternly, "so you may as well admit the truth."

Mrs. Masterbrook hesitated, and for a moment

Penny thought that she meant to deny the charge. Then the woman said coldly:

"Well, what if I did write it? You can't send me to jail for trying to do a good turn."

"No one has any intention of causing you trouble—providing you tell us everything," replied Mr. Nichols significantly.

"What do you wish to know?"

"First, how did you learn Mr. Crocker's secret?"

"I worked for him a great many years," returned the housekeeper with a slight toss of her head. "Both at this cottage and later when he lived at his present home. Not being stupid, I suspected a fly in the ointment so to speak when he came into his fortune."

"You did a little investigation work?" prompted the detective.

"Exactly. I read the letters in the attic, and I thought it was time someone knew about the great injustice which had been done Walter Crocker."

"That was very kind of you, I'm sure," said the detective dryly. "What did you do when you found the letters?"

"I didn't do anything at first. Then Mr. Crocker discharged me——"

"I see," interrupted Mr. Nichols. "His high-handed ways made you remember the letters in the cottage attic. Thinking that the nephew should learn of them you no doubt entered the cottage and secured the evidence."

"I did," the housekeeper nodded grimly.

"But how did you know where to find Walter Crocker?"

"I suspected that he was a certain boy named Michael Gladwin," Mrs. Masterbrook answered. "From various bits of evidence which came my way while I worked for Herman, I gathered that Jenny's child had been placed in the Glenhaven Orphan's Home under that name."

"I must say you have shown a distinct talent for detective work," Mr. Nichols told her dryly. "You sent the anonymous letter to Michael at that address. Then what happened?"

"Nothing. There was no reply. That's all I know of the matter."

"Mrs. Masterbrook, I think you can tell us a

great deal more," said Penny quietly. "For instance when did you first meet the man who calls himself Walter Crocker."

"I don't know what you're talking about," stammered the housekeeper.

"Either you explain everything or we'll take you to the police station," interposed Mr. Nichols.

"All right, I'll tell you exactly what happened," Mrs. Masterbrook agreed after a long moment of thought. "The man is a lawyer—his name is Jay Kline."

"Mr. Madden's missing partner!" exclaimed the detective.

"I don't know anything about him being missing," said the housekeeper crossly. "But he's made me plenty of trouble. I wish I had never set eyes on him."

"Tell us how you came to meet Jay Kline," the detective ordered.

"It was this way. I waited months to hear from the letter which I sent to the Glenhaven Home. When none came I decided that Michael Gladwin must be dead. I saw no reason in that case why I

shouldn't profit a little myself. After all, I worked like a slave for Old Herman and he never paid me a living wage! I took the letters to a city law firm."

"So Mr. Madden is mixed up in this affair too?" asked the detective.

"I don't know anything about him," replied the housekeeper. "I met only Jay Kline. He told me to leave everything to him and that he would force Old Herman to pay me a good sum to get the letters back again."

"There is an ugly name for that sort of thing," said Mr. Nichols. "Blackmail."

"I only meant to make Herman pay me a hundred dollars."

"The principle was exactly the same. I judge that Jay Kline being an unscrupulous rascal took matters out of your hands."

"Yes, the next thing I knew he came here and pawned himself off as Walter Crocker. I tried to make him go away but he wouldn't. I didn't mean to do wrong, Mr. Nichols. You'll not send me to jail, will you?"

"That remains to be seen," replied the detective

tersely. "For the time being you are to remain here in the cottage. Talk with no one."

"Yes, sir," murmured the housekeeper meekly.

The detective did not bother to tell the woman that Michael Gladwin and Michael Haymond were the same individual for he felt that the less she knew the easier it would be to carry out a plan which was forming in his mind.

Penny had supposed that her father would go directly to Herman Crocker, confronting him with the evidence. Instead, Mr. Nichols bided his time. He held several conferences with the Kendon police force.

During his frequent absences from the cottage, Penny, Susan and Michael were left to keep watch of Mrs. Masterbrook. The housekeeper was never allowed to talk with anyone by telephone or to greet persons who chanced to come to the door. While she had given her promise not to disclose anything, Mr. Nichols preferred to take no chance.

"This is the set-up," he told Penny as they held secret session. "I have arranged so that Jay Kline mysteriously recovered his package of letters——"

"But Dad——"

"It is the only way to trap him, Penny. With the letters in his possession, he'll meet Herman Crocker tonight by the footbridge. When Crocker pays over the hush money, police will arrest them both."

"I'd love to see the big roundup," said Penny eagerly.

"You shall," Mr. Nichols promised. "You've earned the right."

That night long before the appointed hour, Penny, her father and several plain-clothes men were waiting in the bushes for the arrival of Kline and Herman Crocker.

Jay Kline was the first to reach the footbridge. He appeared to be very nervous and smoked one cigarette after another. Now and then he would light a match and glance at his watch.

After a fifteen minute wait Herman Crocker's car was heard coming down the road. The automobile stopped some distance from the bridge, and Penny, who had keen eyes, saw that the old man had brought his grandson with him. However, he

left the boy in the car and came toward the bridge alone.

"Well, did you bring the money?" asked Jay Kline.

"I could raise only half the sum you demanded," the old man whined. "You have the letters with you?"

Jay Kline produced the packet.

"Oh, no you don't," he laughed as Herman tried to take the letters from him. "You'll get them only when you've paid over all the money."

"I'll give you what I have. Don't be too hard on me."

At a nod from Mr. Nichols, the plain-clothes men stepped from the bushes surrounding the pair.

"Tricked!" shouted Jay Kline.

Believing that Old Herman had betrayed him to the police, he struck savagely at the man and then brushing past one of the officers, ran down the ravine. Two policemen took after him and soon dragged him back. Herman Crocker had not attempted to escape.

"Take Kline down to Kendon," Mr. Nichols

ordered tersely. "I'll look after Crocker myself."

"You've nothing on me," the old man muttered. "I was being blackmailed, that's all."

"It's no use trying to put up a front," the detective told him. "We know everything. This man was a blackmailer right enough, but the real Walter Crocker has a just claim to a large portion of your estate. A more serious matter is that you are wanted for the robbery of the Kirmenbach residence."

"I'm wanted for what?" gasped the old man.

"You are under suspicion for stealing a diamond necklace."

Until this moment Herman Crocker had been calm and quiet, but suddenly he flew into a violent rage, denying any part in the robbery.

"It's nothing but a frame-up!" he shouted. "Maybe I did keep money that wasn't mine, but I never broke into anyone's house in all my life!"

"Did you or did you not have a toy lantern in your house?" asked Mr. Nichols.

"A toy lantern?" the old man repeated. "Perry had one I guess. He lost it and found it again."

"It happens that Perry's toy lantern was discovered at the scene of the robbery. Perhaps you can explain that."

"I don't know anything about it," said Old Herman dully. "That's the truth."

"We'll see what Perry has to say about it," returned Mr. Nichols. "Come along."

He led the old man back to the automobile where the boy was waiting.

"Perry," said the detective kindly, "do you remember a toy lantern which Mr. Turner gave you the other day?"

"He didn't give it to me," the lad corrected. "It was mine."

"You had lost it?" Mr. Nichols prompted. "Do you recall how long ago you missed the lantern?"

"It was the night Walter Crocker came to see my grandfather," Perry answered instantly. "I was playing with it then and I think maybe I dropped it into his pocket."

"You put the toy lantern into Walter Crocker's coat pocket?" the detective asked in amazement. "Why did you do that?"

"I don't know," answered Perry with a shrug. "I guess I thought he might sit down on it and the glass would go bang! That would have been funny."

"I take it that Walter didn't discover the lantern in his pocket?"

"No, he went off in a hurry and I couldn't even get my toy back."

"This puts an entirely different light on the matter," said Mr. Nichols, speaking slowly. "If Perry is telling the truth, then probably Jay Kline went off without suspecting that the lantern was in his coat. He may have pulled the Kirmenbach job."

"And the toy lantern probably fell from his pocket while he was working at the wall safe," Penny added eagerly. "Can we prove it, Dad?"

"It may be possible to make Kline confess," the detective replied. "I'll go down to Kendon right away and question him."

With Herman Crocker in custody there was no one to look after Perry, so Penny took the lad back to her cottage. He was tucked into bed with no

inkling of the unfortunate fate which had befallen his grandfather.

Penny and Susan sat up until late awaiting the return of Mr. Nichols from Kendon. He came in around midnight and the girls saw at once that he was highly elated.

"Well, Penny, you've won the reward!" he called out gaily.

"Not really!" exclaimed Penny.

"Yes, the case is closed," Mr. Nichols declared, "and Kirmenbach's reward will go to you."

"Tell us all about it," pleaded Penny eagerly.

"Jay Kline broke down and admitted everything. He committed the Kirmenbach robbery and several others as well. However, it was a shock to him when he learned that his conviction came about through Perry's toy lantern. He never dreamed it was in his coat."

"What will become of Herman Crocker?" Penny inquired.

"He has agreed to turn over the major part of his estate to the rightful heir—Michael."

"Will he be sent to prison, Dad?"

"That hasn't been determined, but I imagine he may escape a sentence. However, in any case, Perry is to be taken from him and turned over to someone who will give him better care."

"I'm glad of that," said Penny. "Did Herman offer any reason for doing what he did?"

"Only that he hoped to keep the fortune for himself. Then too, it seems he wished to pass it on to his own grandson, Perry. You remember he was the child of Herman's daughter, Ella—the only person whom the old man ever loved."

"Yet he mistreated Perry."

"In a way, yes, but he probably thought more of the boy than any other living person."

"And what is to become of Mrs. Masterbrook?" Penny questioned, lowering her voice.

"I didn't bring her name into the case at all. At heart I doubt that the woman is bad—she is merely a natural born trouble maker. As far as I'm concerned she's free to go on living in this community. I imagine she has learned her lesson."

"There's no question that Michael will get the money, Dad?"

"Not the slightest. And he'll owe all his good fortune to you, Penny. Come to think of it, I owe you quite a bit myself."

"You?" asked Penny, smiling.

"Yes, you practically solved my case for me," declared the detective. "Not to mention digging up one of your own."

"I had good fun doing it," laughed Penny. Then her face fell. "I suppose now that all the mystery is solved we'll be going back home again."

"We'll certainly pack up and leave this place," answered Mr. Nichols. "But we're not starting for home."

"Then where are we going?" asked Penny in surprise.

"I don't know," replied Mr. Nichols, smiling broadly, "but it will be to some nice quiet place where I can have a vacation."

THE END

PENNY NICHOLS AND THE KNOB HILL MYSTERY

CLARK

GOLDSMITH